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The Crisis of Modernity: Realism and the Postcolonial Indian Novel

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Declaration and Inclusion of Material from a Prior Thesis

I declare that the research presented in this thesis is entirely my own work and has not been submitted for a degree at another university.

Earlier versions of sections of this thesis have appeared in a journal and in an edited book: ‘Colonial Governance, Disaster, and the Social in Bhabani Bhattacharya’s Novels of the 1943 Bengal Famine’, *ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature*, 47.4 (2016), 45-70; and ‘The Margins of Postcolonial Urbanity: Reading Critical Irrealism in Nabarun Bhattacharya’s Fiction’, in *Postcolonial Urban Outcasts: City Margins in South Asian Literature*, ed. by Madhurima Chakraborty and Umme Al-wazadi (London: Routledge, 2016), pp. 39-56. My thanks to the editors and anonymous reviewers for their valuable suggestions to the drafts.

Abstract

This thesis attempts to understand, through a study of postcolonial Indian novels, the nature and character of Indian (post)colonial modernity. Modernity is understood as the social condition that (post)colonial modernisation and development have given rise to. This condition underlies a historical crisis which is manifest in various kinds of catastrophic events – famine, peasant insurgency, caste violence, communal riot, state repression, and so on. By analysing three of these historical events – the 1943-44 Bengal famine, the Naxalbari Movement (1967-1972), and the State of Emergency (1975-1977) – this thesis argues that a careful reading of the dialectic between event and crisis can offer crucial insights into the conditions of postcolonial modernity. It claims that novels that register these events are able to capture the event-crisis dialectic through their use of form and mode. Socially committed writers adopt the realist form to represent the historical aspects and traumatising consequences of the events. However, because the nature, form, and orientation of these events are different, their realisms undergo immense stylistic improvisation. These stylistic shifts are shaped primarily by the writers' adapting of various literary modes to the specific requirements (i.e. the historical context). Modes are chosen to represent and historicise the specific character and appearance of an event. In order to represent the Bengal famine, the thesis argues, Bhabani Bhattacharya and Amalendu Chakraborty use analytical-affective and metafictional modes, while Mahasweta Devi and Nabarun Bhattacharya deploy quest and urban fantastic modes to register the Naxalbari Movement and its aftermath. For the Emergency, writers such as Salman Rushdie, O. V. Vijayan, and Arun Joshi use magical, grotesque and mythical modes, and Nayantara Sahgal and Rohinton Mistry employ critical realist modes, defined sharply by the writers' class- and caste-based perspectives. These modes shape the realisms in the respective texts and transform realist literary form into a highly experimental and heterogeneous matter. Contrary to the prevailing academic belief that modernity breeds modernism, the thesis posits that, in the postcolonial Indian context, the conditions of modernity have provoked a historically conscious, experimental, and modernistic form of 'crisis realism'

Epigraph

Every form is the resolution of a fundamental dissonance of existence; every form restores the absurd to its proper place as the vehicle, the necessary condition of meaning. Georg Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*

If we approach details too closely and fail to open them up for critical inspection, we will indeed find ourselves in the proverbial situation of not seeing the wood for the trees. On the other hand, if we distance ourselves too much, we shall be unable to grasp history because the categories we use themselves become excessively magnified to the point where they become problematic and fail to do justice to their material. Theodor W. Adorno, *History and Freedom*

Where were the research analysts of the future who would salvage the truth from the mountains of untruths and set the records straight? There were too many truths in the world distorted into lies in the records through the conspiracy of the administration. Isn't there daily assassination of truths going on continuously? Mahasweta Devi, *Bashai Tudu*

It would be more accurate to maintain that postcolonial studies, in its prevailing and consolidated aspect at least, has been premised on a distinctive and conjuncturally determined set of assumptions, concepts, theories, and methods that have not only *not* been adequate to their putative object – the ‘postcolonial world’ – but have served fairly systematically to mystify it. [...] What is required instead, it seems to me, is a new ‘history of the present’ – a new reading, above all of the second half of the twentieth century, liberated from the dead weight both of the cold war and of ‘Third-Worldism’ as its compensatory alternative. Neil Lazarus, *The Postcolonial Unconscious*.

CHAPTER ONE

Postcolonial Modernity and 'Crisis Realism'

On August 15, 1947, India gained formal independence from British colonial rule. On the eve of independence, Jawaharlal Nehru, who would soon be India's first Prime Minister, stated in a now famous speech: 'Long years ago we made a tryst with destiny, and now the time comes when we shall redeem our pledge, not wholly or in full measure, but very substantially. At the stroke of the midnight hour, when the world sleeps, India will awake to life and freedom'.¹ However, the country's awakening from slumber, from the long histories of colonialism and imperialist subjection to socio-economic and ideological freedom was not and could not be a smooth one.² The decade of the 1940s saw several enormous moments of national crisis – the Second World War, the 1943-1944 Bengal famine, the communal riots in 1946-1947, the 1946 naval mutiny in Bombay, to name a few. The year of independence was bloodied with gruesome violence due to the partition of the colony into two countries, India and Pakistan. In the decades that followed, India would have wars with China and Pakistan, would encounter wide internal discontent surrounding language and caste issues, and agitations from peasants, students and the working classes on issues of food shortage, unemployment, inflation, and poverty. In the 1970s, these crisis conditions would be aggravated by a corrupt Congress stewardship led by Indira Gandhi, which, in order to save its own image and political priorities, would declare a state of internal emergency in the name of safeguarding democracy from chaos. The present thesis looks at the turbulent period of the first thirty years of Indian history after independence, between 1947 and 1977. It does not read these years as isolated from what came before because of the historical rupture of independence. To the contrary, it seeks to understand how the economic and political crisis in the late-colonial period shaped the social conditions and cultural values in the postcolonial aftermath. It reads late-colonial as a temporal marker denoting roughly the second

¹ Nehru, 'A Tryst with Destiny', in *Nehru: The First Sixty Years Vol II*, ed. by Dorothy Norman (New York: John Day, 1965), p. 336.

² Although it is only from a particular (class-, caste-, and gender-inflected) position that the country can be said to be slumbering at all.

quarter of the twentieth century, shortly before the formal ending of colonialism. Although independence is the nominal break between the late-colonial and the postcolonial, the thesis argues through a reading of a longer framework of historical crises, structures of domination, and acts of resistance that there is hardly a notable conceptual or categorical break there. Rather, this whole period appears as a time of crisis-in-continuity.³ My arguments are based on three catastrophic events: the 1943-1944 Bengal famine, the tribal-peasant Naxalbari movement (1967-1972), and the state of emergency (1975-1977).

Modernisation, Modernity, and Literary Form

These events seem to be categorically different – environmental, political, and constitutional. I will however show that they are all linked with the crises in agriculture, food production, and industry resulting from specific issues in modernisation and development in the colony. The process of modernisation began, Sumit Sarkar notes in *Modern India* (1983),⁴ in the nineteenth century, as the British started to systematically ‘underdevelop’ India through deindustrialisation and the commercialisation of agriculture in order to turn the flourishing world market of cotton into a raw material for export to Britain.⁵ After Britain’s restriction on export to India in 1843, factory-machines for cotton production were imported, and agriculture was further commercialised with irrigation, railways, and the telegraph. In a recent study, Bishnupriya Gupta argues that although there was commercialisation of agriculture, irrigation was limited to particular sectors. It did not help the development of the agricultural sector as a whole. The turn to cash-crop production included priorities given to tea, jute, coal, and other profitable resources over those of the food-grains.⁶ And, as economic historians such as Amiya Bagchi have argued, there was a strong case of racial discrimination in colonial policy, where the native industrial class’s entry into the production market was limited. Bagchi also reasons that the shift away

³ However, the important discontinuities, such as Ambedkar’s making of the constitution etc., need to be acknowledged as well.

⁴ Sumit Sarkar, *Modern India, 1885-1947* (London: Macmillan, 1989).

⁵ Sarkar writes, ‘By the second half of the nineteenth century, British business houses were in virtual control of the overseas trade, shipping and insurance of the country. So the bulk of the profits from the export boom was appropriated by foreign firms and went out of the country as foreign leakage’, p. 31.

⁶ Bishnupriya Gupta, ‘The Rise of Modern Industry in Colonial India’, in *A New Economic History of Colonial India*, ed. by Latika Chaudhary, Bishnupriya Gupta, Tirthankar Roy and Anand V. Swamy (London: Routledge, 2016), pp. 67-83 (pp. 75-81).

from manufacturing (handicrafts and small-scale industries) to agriculture and cash-crops brought down India's GDP and curbed its growth.⁷ The modernisation of industries and agriculture contributed significantly to an unequal and uneven system of growth that made India, though a stable economy even during the mid-twentieth century, into an irredeemably poor one. The most obvious consequences could be seen in a number of disasters in the late nineteenth century. As Sarkar writes, 'The colonial structure, as a whole [...] constituted a "built-in-depressor" for India's agrarian economy. The most obvious indication of this lay in the series of disastrous famines, in the 1870s and again in the late 1890s, the latter wave coinciding with the ravages of plague – while twenty years later even influenza managed to kill off millions'.⁸

What these studies indicate is that colonial modernisation always and by definition occurs in the 'crisis' mode. The Bengal famine, which I will discuss in Chapter Two, has direct links with the changes in agricultural production, the drive for modernisation and industrialisation, and profit-oriented economy in the colony. The Second World War, accompanied by climactic conditions, corruption among traders, and the operation of speculative capital, aggravated the situation. The post-famine society saw increasing deprivation, oppression, and eviction of the peasants by the landed elite in Bengal and around. This resulted in the Tebhaga Movement (1946) in Bengal, which was not an isolated act, but was part of a series of social movements in late-colonial India.⁹ Tebhaga was followed by a longer armed struggle by the peasants of Andhra Pradesh against the Nizam and the Indian armed forces, known as the Telangana Uprising (1947-1952). The continual nature of these movements, and the fact that the Telangana Uprising started in the same year as India's independence,

⁷ Amiya Bagchi, 'De-industrialization in India in the Nineteenth Century: Some Theoretical Implications', *Journal of Development Studies*, 12.2 (1976), 135-64; see also: Raghavendra Chattopadhyay, 'De-industrialisation in India Reconsidered', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 10.12 (1975), 523-53; Immanuel Wallerstein, 'Incorporation of Indian Subcontinent into Capitalist World-Economy', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 21.4 (1986), PE28–PE39. For a reading in the Global South context, see Andre Gunder Frank, *Dependent Accumulation and Underdevelopment* (London: Macmillan, 1978), especially pp. 140-71. Bagchi's theory supports Dadabhai Naoroji's thesis of the 'drain of wealth' from India. Naoroji has shown through a reading of John Stuart Mill how British merchants systematised an urban-based economy in which the wealth (i.e. revenues) from the rural parts of India was supplied to the metropolitan centres of Britain. See Dadabhai Naoroji, *Poverty and Un-British Rule in India* (London: Swan Sonnenschein, 1901).

⁸ Sarkar, *Modern India*, p. 36.

⁹ As Sarkar has noted, there were a number of social movements 'from below' by tribals, peasants, artisans, fishermen, etc., in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in response to the 'disastrous' social conditions in the rural world. The Tebhaga was the result of these various resistance movements produced by the specific colonial-historical conjunctures. Ibid, p. 43-62.

only serve to show that there was no rupture or break, or no awakening from slumber for those on the lowest tier in the socio-economic ladder. These insurgencies were organised by the peasants' and workers' fronts of the Communist Party, which was also instrumental in organising food movements in the cities in late 1950s and early 1960s. The crises in food and agriculture were escalated by inflation. Jawaharlal Nehru's death and Indira Gandhi's rise to power in the mid-1960s marked a shift in politics, especially in her heavy commercialisation of agriculture through the Green Revolution project which had the effect of making already rich farmers even richer. Gandhi's economic reforms failed to address the wide uneven development in rural India, the unending peasant oppression, the new nexus between landed elite, political heads, and the police, etc. As the old problems of deprivation and oppression continued, peasants in Naxalbari rose in arms in 1967. The uprising continued for five years until brutally crushed by the state. Soon, Gandhi, unable to tackle the crisis in agriculture, employment, inflation, and economy, and fearful of the rising dissatisfaction with her government declared a state of emergency to coercively 'discipline' the postcolonial public and to pave the way for neo-colonialism in the name of development. Indian postcolonial democracy now entered a new phase of state authoritarianism and regimentation. Ranajit Guha has published a fiercely critical essay on the emergency measures. In an argument similar to what Frantz Fanon wrote in 'The Pitfalls of National Consciousness' in the late 1950s, Guha contends that true democracy never actually existed in India because decolonisation did not destroy the old colonial state, but only transferred interest and power from the British ruling bodies to the Indian ruling classes.¹⁰ The artificial and state-imposed version of democracy lost credibility when, five years after the liberation of India from colonial rule, the Nehruvian government brutally crushed a peasant movement which demanded landholding and better crop share rights in Telangana. The dead body of democracy was clearly buried in the state's autocratic-repressive acts in the Naxalbari tribal-peasant uprising. The emergency, thus, was not a radical break from a culture of democracy, as the passive opposition would say: 'It is [rather] the realization by the ruling classes, acting through the government of the day, of the full potential of the

¹⁰ Ranajit Guha, 'Indian Democracy: Long Dead, Now Buried', *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, 6.1 (1976), 39-53 (p. 40); for Fanon, see *The Wretched of the Earth*, 1961, trans. by Constance Farrington (London: Penguin, 2001), pp. 119-65.

violence of a state which they had themselves conceived of and set up as hostile to democracy'.¹¹

These aspects of crisis, violence, and resistance, produced by capitalist modernisation and bourgeois political dominance in the (post)colony, are read here as the social condition of modernity in (post)colonial India. These conditions were reflected widely in Indian novels from the late 1920s onwards.¹² Kalindi Charan Panigrahi's *Oriya Matira Manisa* (*Man of the Soil*, 1931), Tarashankar Bandyopadhyay's *Bangla Chaitali Ghurni* (*The Whirlwind*, 1932), Nanak Singh's Punjabi *Chitta Lahu* (*White Blood*, 1932), A. Bapiraju's Telugu *Narayana Rao* (*Narayana Rao*, 1934), Gajanan T. Madkholkar's Marathi *Muktatma* (*Free Soul*, 1936), Premchand's Hindi *Godaan* (*The Gift of A Cow*, 1936), and Raja Rao's English *Kanthapura* (1938), variously narrate the rapid rise of the manufacturing and steel industries in rural areas, the destruction of the handicraft industry and the debilitating agricultural relations, the large migration of rural workers to the city, the native bourgeois elite's exploitation of the peasants, the resistance of the peasants and the subaltern populations, the tension of a looming World War, the general social crisis and the nationalist agitations under Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, and so on.¹³ These conditions also influence the formal and structural elements of the narratives: there are uses of archaic cultural forms, such as the *jatra* or the *kathakata* alongside modern and contemporary ones in terms of plot development and characterisation, uses of parallel temporal scales, problematic spatial locations of the narrators, aspects of popular faith in the supernatural and the mythological alongside emerging features of a rationalised subject, and so on.¹⁴ In novels that register the catastrophic events such as the famine or the communal riots, there are further developments in form and style. Novels about the 1943 Bengal famine, by Bhabani Bhattacharya, Manik Bandyopadhyay, Tarashankar Bandyopadhyay, or Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay,

¹¹ Guha, 'Democracy', p. 44.

¹² This is not exclusive to novels as a genre. My focus remains mainly on novels for the genre's historical link with capitalism and novelistic realism's capacity to render complex social conditions produced by a society's historical transition to (colonial) capitalism.

¹³ For a reading on this, see Sisir Kumar Das, *A History of Indian Literature, 1911-1956: Struggle for Freedom: Triumph and Tragedy* (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 2015), pp. 276-300.

¹⁴ For a reading on this, see *Colonialism, Modernity, and Literature: A View from India*, ed. by Satya P. Mohanty (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011). However, I think Mohanty uncritically dismisses Jameson's views on a singular but uneven/unequal modernity for an argument on alternative/indigenous modernity. See his introduction, especially, pp. 4-6.

demonstrate wide improvisation in narrative form in order to represent the immensity of horror in a society already in deep turmoil as a result of the Second World War and the anti-colonial agitations. In these novels, there are scenes of emaciated hungry people wailing for rice, dying carelessly on the streets, seizing food from their offspring and from animals; scenes of rape and prostitution, of corruption among traders, and of deep entrenchment in class; and scenes of exhibitionism of wealth by the bourgeoisie. The question of how to represent this terrible period of crisis and suffering affected the contemporary writer. The novels, especially those written by socially committed writers (proletarian, working-class, and activist writers, as well as writers critical about the socio-economic exploitation of the poor and the vulnerable), experiment with specific modes, through which they attempt to balance the requirements of the age: to document the current social condition, to analyse the factors responsible for the disaster, and to use literature as a therapy/reflection for the pain and suffering of the people. It is from this sense of necessity and urgency that Bhabani Bhattacharya wrote the novel, *So Many Hungers!*. Published in 1947, just a month after independence, the novel is deeply analytical in mode, anti-colonial and anti-imperialist in nature, and highly sentimental and emotional on occasion. There are episodes of an ethnographic-documentary nature while at the same time, the language sometimes assumes a melodramatic tone. Bhattacharya ends his novel with a vision of a future utopian socialist transformation. This analytical-affective mode, however, is not predominant among other writers. Bhattacharya's contemporaries use modes that are not historical-analytical or that do not end with an optimistic vision of a transformative future. The choice of modes changes as the famine transforms into chronic malnutrition and starvation in the postcolonial rural society. Amalendu Chakraborty's *Ākāler Sandhāne* (1982; *In Search of Famine*) adopts a metafictional mode and uses various interruptive devices such as interior monologues, asides, and anecdotes. Both of these novels are realist, especially in the way that they 'register' the 'world' in their 'works' and employ an analytical-historical style, but the modes give new shapes to the writings, making their realisms increasingly dynamic, experimental and 'modernistic'. These mutations and strategies are conventionally read in academic circles as technical shortcomings or structural weaknesses within the realist form. My contention here is that the specific crisis conjunctures of catastrophic events require a set of innovative and radical aesthetic techniques, mutations, and strategies within realist writing. Rather than structural weaknesses, the experimental

modes should be understood as integral features of a historically conscious crisis narrative. The novels, in forging innovations in the modes of realism, render the categorical distinctions between literary realism and modernism inappropriate and unprofitable, and project the aesthetic category of modernism as constituting stylistically the historical-social field of 'crisis realism'. It will be useful to frame my discussion of crisis and event, and on realism and modernism, through a reading of modernity in Fredric Jameson's work.¹⁵

In *A Singular Modernity* (2005), Jameson defines the links between modernisation, modernity and modernism: modernity is 'the new historical situation, modernization [i]s the process whereby we get there, and modernism [i]s a reaction to that situation and that process alike, a reaction that can be aesthetic and philosophical-ideological'.¹⁶ Modernity as a historical situation is 'new' because older feudal and tribal economic modes have been dismantled, because methods of capitalist accumulation never seen before have arisen, and because innovations in technology and machinery have emerged. Here, Jameson is careful enough to use the word 'situation' in a Sartrean sense to suggest the contingency and limits of a particular situation and the desire to break free from the dominant frameworks and to achieve social freedom.¹⁷ Modernity as a historical situation retains within its framework this

¹⁵ There have been studies on colonial modernity in India, notably by Partha Chatterjee, Sudipta Kaviraj, and Dipesh Chakrabarty. But in their constitutive focus on the urban middle class, they do not always pay attention to capitalism's shaping of the conditions of colonial modernity, and more specifically, about the nexus between imperialism, modernisation, and modernity in the rural-peripheral context – which is the focus area of my thesis. See Partha Chatterjee, *Our Modernity* (Kuala Lumpur: Vinlin Press, 1997); Sudipta Kaviraj, 'Modernity and Politics in India', *Daedalus* 129.1 (2000), 137-62; Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), pp. 37-46. A more theoretically cogent argument on the links between colonialism and modernity in the Indian context can be found in Gurminder K. Bhambra, *Rethinking Modernity: Postcolonialism and the Sociological Imagination* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), especially pp. 15-32, pp. 56-83.

¹⁶ Fredric Jameson, *A Singular Modernity* (London: Verso, 2005), p. 99.

¹⁷ Sartre writes in *Being and Nothingness* that one does not choose not to have freedom. Man is 'condemned to be free' (p. 449). There are no limits to this freedom. But the outer world can never produce an action by itself. Man has to envision an alternative and to act upon the desire for change. Sartre calls freedom in the outer world as 'being-in-itself', and the desire to fix a limit and to overcome it as a 'situation' or a 'being-for-itself'. He writes: 'There can be a free-for-itself only as engaged in a resisting world. Outside of this engagement the notions of freedom, of determinism, of necessity lose all meaning' (p. 483). He also points out that this desire 'to be free' should not be confused with one's subjective wishes. Only in extreme circumstances (Sartre was writing this work as France was occupied by Nazi Germany during the Second World War) can people make significant moral choices and do a fuller use of freedom. I think this applies reasonably to the anti-colonial context, especially the acts of wrestling social freedom both from the imposing elements of colonial-capitalist modernity and from the native bourgeois dominance of class and culture. See Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on the Phenomenological Ontology*, trans. by Hazel E. Barnes (London: Methuen, 1969).

dialectic of dominance and resistance, and is not to be understood in liberal terms, as ‘progress’. Jameson is also careful to argue that modernism is a reaction to both this contingency and the historical process. But from his readings it appears that realism is capable of doing everything that he finds in modernism; in other words, realism is itself a modernist mode. Jameson recognises the blurred distinctions between realism and modernism. Every modernism tries to address the social world in idioms and techniques that have not been used before, and this is exactly what every new realism does:

Each realism is also by definition new: and aims at conquering a whole new area of content for its representation. Each wishes to annex what has not yet been represented, what has not yet ever been named or found its voice (and this is why throughout and beyond the age of modernism, there are still new and vibrant realisms to be heard and to be recognized, in parts of the world and areas of social totality into which representation has not yet penetrated). This is to say not only that each new realism arises out of dissatisfaction with the limits of the realisms that preceded it, but also and more fundamentally that realism itself in general shares precisely that dynamic of innovation we ascribed to modernism as its uniquely distinguishing feature.¹⁸

However, Jameson does not go on to discuss the complexities and innovations within realism(s). Modernism appears to be the philosophical-aesthetic response to the conditions of modernity. Since realism is primarily an epistemological category and modernism primarily an aesthetic category, these two are incommensurable and ‘the attempt to combine the two into a single master narrative must therefore necessarily fail’.¹⁹ What I will seek to do in this thesis is not to combine these categories, but to point out the experimental modes of realism that are ‘recognisably’ modernist, meaning that realist narratives are able to capture the complex dialectical relations of the ‘situation and [the] process’ of modernisation. This can be understood if we read historical events and historical crisis dialectically. I will do this after elucidating how my use of these terms differs from Jameson’s notions of ‘break’ and ‘continuity’.

At an early point in his book, Jameson defines break and continuity as two-fold movements sharing a dialectical relation. Historical continuity is the ‘insistent and unwavering focus on the seamless passage from past to present [which] slowly

¹⁸ Ibid, p. 123.

¹⁹ Ibid, p. 124.

turns into a consciousness of a radical break; while at the same time the enforced attention to a break gradually turns the latter into a period in its own right'.²⁰ The consciousness of continuity gives birth to the radical consciousness of breaks and consequently of periodisation. Jameson here has a longer history in mind, in which he finds two radical breaks, namely, the European Renaissance with its pre-modernity and the ancients with their pre-modernity. The ancients here refer to the Roman tradition, from which 'the modern conception of abstraction and of philosophy itself, along with a certain conception of history as something distinct from the chronicle, first appear'. The Renaissance is the break in which 'a certain instauration of "modernity"' begins to appear as 'the unmarked other of a present felt to be the reinvention of the older or first modernity'.²¹ What marks this second break and the consequent periodisation is the capitalist mode of production, which proceeds to subsume historical differences under a unilateral logic of global accumulation. For Jameson, these two breaks are not gaps or discontinuities in the Foucauldian epistemic sense. These are new paradigms that have dis severed most of their connections from previous ones. He writes:

[F]or if the break is initially characterized as a perturbation of causality as such, as the severance of the threads, as the moment in which the continuities of an older social and cultural logic come to an incomprehensible end and find themselves displaced by a logic and form of causality not active in the older system, then the renewed and mesmerized contemplation of the moment of such a break, as it begins to detect causalities and conferences not previously visible to the naked eye is bound to expand that break into a period in its own right.²²

In this *longue durée* framework, Jameson finds aesthetic modes to be 'transitional' in character. Speaking mainly of the capitalist mode of production, he writes that a new economic mode results in a new historical consciousness and a new temporality. But very much like the paradigmatic nature of economic modes, where the existence of other modes either lies hidden or is at their nascent stage, aesthetic modes also contain many temporalities. Taking after Étienne Balibar, Jameson posits that in periods of great economic and social transition, these different temporalities reveal their co-existence in the form of differential aesthetic techniques, which constitute the axis of

²⁰ Ibid, p. 24.

²¹ Ibid, pp. 26-27.

²² Ibid, p. 27.

modernism.²³ My point here is that, moments of extreme historical crisis – or ‘events’ in their historical/sociological meaning – such as famines, social movements, brief dictatorial regimes, or coups, do not necessarily suggest a constitutive break or result in a historical consciousness formative for a new period. However, these events do give birth to new aesthetic modes in order to adequately represent the specificities of the historical crises, conjunctures, and contexts. Indeed, as I will show, sometimes multiple modes – even ones that seem contradictory on the surface, such as the gothic and the social realist – are juxtaposed in a literary work which is based on a catastrophic crisis and is predominantly realist in form. The general condition of crisis, produced by historical/global factors or by neo-colonialism in India, seems to call for a general realist framework, while the specific/local conjuncture of a crisis like famine or political uprising appears to inspire the use of specific modes.

This reading, based on crisis and event, is important for the context of my thesis for two main reasons. First, unlike Jameson’s *longue durée* framework, I am focusing on a shorter time frame, namely, the late-colonial period. While the crisis in Indian agriculture, as I have argued above, had a long history of British commercialisation, events like the famine or the political uprising were conditioned and shaped significantly by the immediate and escalating crises in politics and history, such as the Second World War (for the Bengal famine), militant Leftism (for the Naxalbari movement), and the rise of an opposition coalition party (for the emergency). Even if we view this period of forty-odd years in terms of the long twentieth century, the historical conditions of imperialism, capitalism, and colonialism, and the acts and practices of political resistance to both the British and the bourgeois native, are so overpowering that the entire (post)colonial time frame can together be called a break and one long period in Jamesonian terms.²⁴ We will need an elaborated theorisation to understand the historical specificities and crisis conjunctures of the (post)colonial period. Second, although all these catastrophic events share a common link in food and agricultural crises, they are also different from each other in type, nature, and character. A famine or starvation may have led to a

²³ ‘[O]ne of the great themes which has conventionally been identified as a dominant in literary modernism – namely temporality itself [...] is very precisely a mode in which this transitional economic structure of incomplete capitalism can be registered and identified as such’. Ibid, p. 142.

²⁴ Indian history has long been periodised in terms of the breaks manufactured by different dominant Indian and foreign empires.

peasant uprising, which may then have been followed by repressive state action, but these are all constitutively different kinds of events. A famine and an agrarian-based political uprising may include wide scenes of violence, but the immediacy and immensity of a famine are not comparable to the long deprivation, dispossession, and violence against peasants by the landed elite, or to the violence produced by guerrilla warfare waged by tribal-peasants. These different events ask for different modes of expression, which in turn shape the form of realist representations. I will argue that these culturally specific modes, in their late-colonial South Asian/Indian context at least, are able to capture the tensions between the global and the local, between the European-colonialist shaping of uneven modernity and the national/specific responses to it, between domination and resistance. In order to understand this aesthetic-historical matrix, we will need a theorisation of the dialectic between historical crisis and event in the (post)colonial conjuncture.

Historical Event and Crisis

In her book *Critical Events* (1995), Veena Das defines events as those that share relations with several institutions ‘moving across family, community, bureaucracy, courts of law, the medical profession, the state and multinational corporations’, and bring about new modes of action redefining traditional categories of knowledge production.²⁵ She takes from François Furet’s notion that the French Revolution was the event par excellence as it ‘*instituted a new modality of historical action* which was not inscribed into the inventory of that situation’,²⁶ and proceeds to critically read the events of the Partition, the Sikh militancy, the Bhopal gas disaster, and others, focusing on the violence perpetrated on socio-economically, sexually, and religiously marginal bodies and communities. She finds that over time, victim communities have emerged as powerful political actors, both in terms of declaring their representative authority over their voices and bodies through an antagonistic politics against the state, and consolidating the community’s power through the memorialisation of the pains and sufferings of the members.²⁷ Das’ main interest here lies in recovering the individual voices, which have either been maligned by the state (by professional

²⁵ Veena Das, *Critical Events: An Anthropological Perspective on Contemporary India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 6.

²⁶ Ibid, p. 5.

²⁷ Ibid, pp. 12-13.

organisations, such as the multinational company in the case of the Bhopal gas disaster, which seek immunity from their crime), or glorified by the communities in acts of declaring legitimacy over the pain shared by the subjects of those communities.²⁸ In both cases, she says, there is a misreading of pain and suffering, and an eliding of individual, dissenting, contingent voices by viewing them as irresponsible, accidental, or immoral. An anthropologist, Das attempts to read the nature of irresponsibility with responsibility, and to give voice to the unheard and the subaltern: 'The anthropologist must appear not in the role of an observer but that of a hearer, and the subject must correspondingly appear in the role of a speaker' and recover the disembodied voice.²⁹ These ideas prompt me to understand the events from the grounded perspective of the victim communities, and motivate me to identify and complicate literature's acts of giving voice to the unheard and the routinely silenced. But a problem arises with Das' conception of totalities and resistant practices. She writes,

To recover such embodied narrations [voice] seems to me the only way in which one can resist the totalizing discourses that become evident not only in narratives of the state and narratives embedded in the professional organization, but also in the discourses of resistance that use the vey logic of the state which they seek to resist.³⁰

²⁸ The historian Shahid Amin does a similar study in *Event, Metaphor, and Memory* (1994). He reads the history of a peasant riot in the Chauri Chaura village of the northern state of Uttar Pradesh in 1922, which caused Mahatma Gandhi to suspend the Civil Disobedience movement. The event was born both of the long history of fear and hatred for the colonial masters and their symbolic-repressive machineries (the police, the guns, and uniform, etc.) and of the immediate violent skirmishes between the armed police and an unarmed demonstrating satyagrahi-volunteers (Gandhi's political followers who sought truth through nonviolence). Considered a serious flaw in the nationalist/Gandhian anti-colonial campaign, the event was initially obliterated from the official nationalist narratives and the public processes of memorialisation, and repurposed later as an instance of 'politics by other means'. Amin seeks to reconstruct this erased and maligned event through memories and cultural acts of remembrance by the current relatives of the 'rioters'. He traces through oral narratives, as well as through various bureaucratic and newspaper documents and political pamphlets, how this event was related to both local peasant practices and the imaginings of Gandhi as a messiah, and how through such acts official nationalist narratives appropriated, displaced, and co-opted local resistant practices. An event achieves a double meaning here, as one 'fixed in time and also as a metaphor gathering significances outside this time-frame' (p. 3). This is a powerful reading, as it tries to balance the actual (official) course of the event with the way the event was received and used in official as well as unofficial speech and writing. At the same time, in order to emphasise the element of public memory and the localisation of the discourse, Amin's work, which follows a method of microhistory, is not able to tell us how this event was connected to the current political crisis in nationalism, especially with the wide rise of native armed struggles and 'terroristic' activities, and the contemporary nation-wide instances of peasant resistance (the wider historical-metaphorical dimension of the event, so to say). See, *Event, Metaphor, Memory: Chauri Chaura 1922-1992* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).

²⁹ Das, *Events*, p. 18.

³⁰ Ibid, p. 23.

By totalities, as her chapters show, she means the way the state often tries to abstract or reify the contingent and individual cases of pain and suffering through legal and judicial practices and through a recourse to universal humanism. ‘Discourses of resistance’ stand for the practices, strategies, and rhetoric used by the victim communities to appropriate the contingent cases and challenge the state. ‘A critique of the state’, as she writes, ‘which reproduces the very logic it seeks to contest and which exists in the same arena of historicity can do little more than mirror the state’s structures’.³¹ These observations are problematic on two grounds: first, there is an a priori understanding that all resistant practices and elements in a given community will support the community’s statist counter-practices. Resistance structures are considered a monolithic ideal type. To take one example from our readings, the emergency produced two distinct narratives: one official, one-sided, statist propaganda, and the other oppositional (political and legal narratives and social commentaries published just after the lifting of the emergency). The latter was also using statist discourses of meaning appropriation by declaring legitimacy on the sufferers’ bodies (reifying their individual experiences), asking for punishment of the culprits, and asserting justice. But in the latter group, there were also competing narratives such as the underground newsletters, pamphlets, or journalistic criticisms. They were opposed to the emergency since the beginning, in languages that were either extremist or moderate, but in both cases highly self-reflexive. There were literary and artistic cases of resistance that challenged the authoritarian regime and questioned the validity of statist and counter-statist discourses in rendering the constructed nature of truth. Das’ theorisation is unable to address this layered and complex case of resistance. Secondly, totalities, as Hegel, Marx, or Lukács understood it, do not mean an appropriation of competing voices for a statist discourse (which sounds closer to the term totalitarian), but rather ensembles where competing, disruptive, dominant, and residual elements constitute history and society. As we will shortly see through Lukács, a practice of totality, for a writer, is an understanding of the paradoxical fusion of social dissonances through a dialectic of the everyday and the historical.³² Interestingly, Das seems to do a similar thing as she theorises pain and

³¹ Ibid, pp. 16-17.

³² Dialectic, as Jameson defines the term, is ‘a conceptual coordination of incommensurabilities [...] a kind of new language strategy, in which both identity and difference are given their due in advance and

suffering from the Wittgensteinian concept of communicability (that pain is social) and inalienability (that pain is physical-conceptual), and adds that ‘there is no individual ownership of pain’.³³ It is through retaining the specificity of the individual and trying to establish a community of suffering via the collectivisation of pain, that an anthropologist, and for that matter a writer or literary critic, it seems to me, can break open the totalities of social relationships.

Althusser’s reading of the *historical event* is useful for my context in addressing this gap in Das’ theorisation. Althusser writes in the appendix of the essay, ‘Contradiction and Overdetermination’ (1969):

What makes such and such event *historical* is not the fact that it is an event, but precisely *its insertion into forms which are themselves historical*, into forms which have nothing to do with the bad infinity which Engels retains even when he has left the vicinity of the original model, forms which, on the contrary, are perfectly *definable* and *knowable* (knowable, Marx insisted, and Lenin after him, through empirical that is non-philosophical scientific disciplines). An event falling within one of these forms, which has the wherewithal to fall within one of these forms, *which is a possible content for one of these forms*, which affects them, concerns them, reinforces or disturbs them, which provokes them or which they provoke, or even choose or select, that is a *historical event*.³⁴

The context of this formulation arises from Althusser’s understanding of overdetermination, which he says is present in Marx’s and Engels’ works, but which the dogmatic ‘disciples’ have ruled out in their economism, empiricism, and determinism. Althusser here explains the content of a letter Engels wrote to J. Bloch in 1890, where Engels clarified that the mode of production was determinant only ‘in the last instance’; ‘the various elements of the superstructure’ – political, religious, juridical, legal, literary – ‘also exercise their influence upon the course of the historical struggle, and in many cases preponderate in determining their form’.³⁵ In the Russian Revolution, which is his object of study, Althusser finds a principal contradiction between forces and relations of production (a socially backward country and the

systematically played off against each other (in ways that for non- or pre-dialectical thought will seem to break the law of non-contradiction)’. Jameson, *Singular*, pp. 64-65.

³³ Das, *Events*, pp. 194-95.

³⁴ Louis Althusser, ‘Contradiction and Overdetermination’, in *For Marx*, trans. by Ben Brewster (London: Verso, 1990), pp. 87-128 (p. 126); emphasis in original.

³⁵ *Ibid*, p. 112.

presence of an advanced imperialist/capitalist condition); but there are also different conditions of existence, different circumstances, national and international in context, ‘with their own consistency and effectivity’ which ‘merge into a real unity’ in a time of crisis and give birth to this *revolutionary rupture*. These ‘radically heterogeneous’ elements range from political and ideological structures to specific regional customs, habits, national traditions, international political contexts, etc.³⁶ They accumulate over time and exacerbate the principal contradiction. Althusser does not see a particular event, such as the French Revolution, as a radical break in the way Furet or Das do, as an exception giving birth to new modes of relations and actions. For him, an event is rather the consolidation of a crisis in various forms, their ‘overdetermined contradiction’. Unlike in Hegel – at least as Althusser reads him³⁷ – where the organic totality of structures is shaped by ‘an internal principle’ or ‘abstract ideology’,³⁸ in Marx totality becomes a dialectic between the economic and the associated set of structures which accumulate over time, crystallise and transform into an overdetermined, historical event. Overdetermination becomes the ‘*accumulation of effective determinations*’ (deriving from the superstructures and from special national and international circumstances) on the determination in the last instance by the economic’.³⁹ So, the historical event that he refers to in the quote is an event because all forms of its condition of being (base and superstructure, so to say) are overdetermined as historical and knowable. In this, Althusser offers us a more historically grounded definition where the event is a culmination of a series of events (crisis-forms) that are heterogeneous and possibly antagonistic between themselves, but which also fuse together to produce the revolutionary rupture. These various forms of effects concern, reinforce, and provoke one another to shape the meta-narrative of the historical event and struggle. Althusser uses the Gramscian word ‘conjuncture’ to

³⁶ Ibid, p. 114.

³⁷ Of course, several dialectical philosophers (from Gillian Rose to Timothy Brennan) have argued that Althusser completely misreads Hegel on this. Indeed, Adorno gave a lecture on ‘Universal and Particular’ around the same time as Althusser’s first publication of this essay in a Communist Party journal. Adorno argued that the idea of a *particular* historical event, understood as a nodal point of crisis in the historical process, was trendy and factual, and instead asked us to look at the Hegelian notion of a universal history, where the particular is stored in as a negative or a ‘bad’ element. This lecture, later published as an essay, seems to challenge Althusser in that what Althusser labours to produce is already available to him in the dialectical tradition. But I also think that it is in Althusser’s expression that the relations between historical events and crisis, for my context at least, appear cogent, sharp, and enabling. For the Adorno essay, see ‘Universal and Particular’, in *History and Freedom: Lectures, 1964-1965*, trans. by Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008), pp. 10-18.

³⁸ Althusser, ‘Contradiction’, p. 102.

³⁹ Ibid, p. 113.

remind us that these events are specific in their context, and global in their world-historical relations and meanings.

To come back to our context, the disaster condition of the famine was affected by other events such as the War, climactic conditions, hoarding of grain by corrupt traders, etc. An analysis of the event must be conducted through an investigation into how the various dimensions of the crisis of a historical conjuncture produced mini-events, in which the possibility of the rise of a greater historical event of rupture lay hidden. The crystallisation of a period's historical crisis into an event has to be understood through the event's accumulated, layered nature. At the same time, the form, orientation, and character of the event are also important. The Bengal famine is an example of a disaster event. But famine as a disaster is different from other kinds of disaster such as cholera, earthquake, and landslide. In fact, no two famines have the same historical orientation and form. If we compare the 1943 famine with another famine, such as the Bombay famine of 1875-1876, we can find many similarities in the causes-and-effects due to similar historical forces, but there are also important differences because of the different forces and relations of production and the different evolution and adaption of historical-cultural factors. This is why this historical investigation into the event will also need a critical reading such as Das', where an event's particular nature and the formation of victim communities through resistant acts and discursive strategies are taken into account; where the writer's role is understood as listening to the complex nature of pain and suffering of the underprivileged and transforming them into speakers, *giving voice* to their suffering. Novels based on crises and events, I believe, are able to address this subtle historical link between the global and the local, between historical crisis and the accumulated nature of an event, through their use of form and mode. They are able to respond to the global-singular but uneven and unequal nature of modernity through their complex interactive matrices. I will turn to these two keywords now for my argument on crisis realism.

Form and Mode: Framing Crisis Realism

Form and mode are often used interchangeably in academic circles. But there is a crucial distinction. According to Raymond Williams, form is ‘a visible or outward shape, and an inherent shaping impulse’.⁴⁰ It relates both to the external/superficial and the essential/determining. It is through form and its mediational nature that a work registers the world in all its complex dimensions, gives these dimensions a social meaning, and reflects on the process of registration. Lukács thinks that form is compositional in nature. He writes that: ‘All the fissures and rents which are inherent in the historical situation must be drawn into the form-giving process and cannot and should not be disguised by compositional means’.⁴¹ Form is also deeply historical. As Williams notes, literary form is ‘inevitably a relationship [...] between social (collective) modes and individual projects’.⁴² Writers adopt new forms in ‘[p]eriods of major transition between social systems’: ‘new formal possibilities [...] are inherently possibilities of a newly shared perception, recognition, and consciousness’.⁴³ Mode, on the other hand, is the medium, the manner, the fashion through which this shape is achieved. Williams in the quote above uses the phrase ‘social (collective) mode’. For him, modes are mainly genres, such as romance, epic, tragedy, and so on, which are literary expressions of an older, heterogeneous society. The shifting mode of economy, the birth of industrial capitalism and the bourgeois class, and the increasing urbanisation of the rural and new coercive methods of labour practices, make novels into an ‘individual project’, the dominant mode of the current times. Williams uses the word ‘mode’ again to mean the ‘new mode of consciousness’ that emerges from a new mode of economic production and new forms of social and cultural relationships.⁴⁴ This reading of mode reminds me of Northrop Frye’s *longue durée* understanding of the word. For Frye, the last fifteen centuries of literary production have offered five predominant modes: myth, romance, high mimetic (epic/tragic), low mimetic (comedy/realistic fiction), and ironic. ‘During the last

⁴⁰ Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 186.

⁴¹ Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel: A Historico-philosophical Essay on the Forms of Great Epic Literature*, trans. by Anna Bostock (London: Merlin Press, 1971), p. 64.

⁴² Williams, *Marxism*, p. 187.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 189.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 190; Terry Eagleton widens this use in his understanding of ‘literary mode of production’, where literature’s production of meaning appears to be tied to the material conditions of production. See Terry Eagleton, *Criticism and Ideology* (London: Verso, 1976), pp. 45-64. I am not stretching the term this far in my use here in the thesis.

hundred years', he writes, 'most serious fiction has tended increasingly to be ironic in mode'.⁴⁵ Surveying a large corpus of Western literary texts produced within the last two thousand years, he proceeds to show how the ironic mode variously uses the mythical, elegiac, idyllic, or pastoral modes of an older time. Known as archetypal criticism, Frye's framework is insightful for a holistic study. But like Jameson's *longue durée* framework, it does not do justice to the immediate historical contexts and conjunctures. There is no discussion in Frye as to why a certain mode is chosen, or why it mixes with/brings together different 'residual' modes. He does regard the changing social contexts as an influential factor, but the specific contexts are never studied carefully.⁴⁶ In the uses of Williams and Frye, then, modes are mainly generic expressions of a long historical time period. These definitions do inform us about the historical nature of modes but are not helpful in understanding the tremendously energetic and dynamic nature of literary modes. In my reading of catastrophe-based novels, I find modes to be responding to two aspects in particular: the specific form and nature of the catastrophic events and the geo-cultural specificities in the content. These specificities shape the form of realism and turn mode into both a determining and yet a literarily unstable element. As Chris Baldick defines the term in his *Dictionary of Literary Terms*, mode is '[a]n unspecific critical term usually designating a broad but identifiable kind of literary method, mood, or manner that is not tied exclusively to a particular form or genre'.⁴⁷ I will note these complex interactive matrices between form and mode through their relation to literary realism, which I argue is the predominant literary form used for the catastrophic event-based novels.

Realism is the manner through which a work of art imitates and registers the workings of the world. It is both a philosophical/epistemological category and an aesthetic form. Epistemologically, it means there is a world 'out there' and that it is in principle possible to register the world through the medium of language, paint, camera, or others. The method or the set of formal techniques through which the world is

⁴⁵ Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), pp. 33-35 (pp. 34-35).

⁴⁶ In fact, the term 'Western' is also hardly properly qualified.

⁴⁷ Chris Baldick, *The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*, 4th edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), <<http://0-www.oxfordreference.com.pugwash.lib.warwick.ac.uk/view/10.1093/acref/9780198715443.001.0001/acref-9780198715443-e-736?rskey=L2SQr7&result=749>> [accessed 16 April, 2017]

represented is what composes the aesthetic part.⁴⁸ Novelistic realism arose with the rise of industrial capitalism and Enlightenment values in the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century European world.⁴⁹ Raymond Williams tells us that because of the term's historical link with philosophical schools such as nominalism, conceptualism, and others, there was a long debate within novelists as to what constituted real in realism.⁵⁰ A representation was considered 'realistic' which could reproduce objects, characters, actions, and situations in a lifelike manner. But such a representation, writers were acutely aware, focussed on the superficial appearance of reality. There are individual emotions, feelings, social and historical forces operating behind the appearance of reality in a particular way. For Williams, realism was not a static form but 'a conscious commitment to understanding and describing these forces'.⁵¹ Georg Lukács, who is often credited with the critical popularity of the term, states that realism is achieved when an author situates a social 'type' in a protagonist, in whom all the socially and historically determining elements are active. Realism captures a 'problematic' individual's negotiations with the pressures of society, and reveals in the act the totality of structures unavailable to the fragmenting perspective of the individual. In *Studies in European Realism*, he writes:

Realism means a three dimensionality, an all-roundedness, that endows with independent life characters and human relationships. It by no means involves a rejection of the emotional and intellectual dynamism which necessarily develops together with the modern world. All it opposes is the destruction of the completeness of the human personality and of the objective typicality of men and situation through an excessive cult of the momentary mood.⁵²

Lukács is reacting here against the rise of naturalism and (psychological) modernism which, according to him, deliberately obstruct the comprehension of the roundedness

⁴⁸ In order to understand the complexities involved in the act of literary mimesis, see, Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. by William R. Trask, intr. by Edward Said (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003 [orig. pub: 1953]).

⁴⁹ Ian Watt considers formal realism as a set of techniques that were meant to represent an older society's transition to capitalist modernity in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Europe. See, *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1957), p. 31.

⁵⁰ Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), pp. 258-59.

⁵¹ Ibid, p. 261.

⁵² Georg Lukács, *Studies in European Realism: A Sociological Survey of the Writings of Balzac, Stendhal, Zola, Tolstoy, Gorki and Others*, trans. by Edith Bone (London: Merlin Press, 1972), p. 6.

of life through ‘an excessive cult of the momentary mood’. The word ‘roundedness’, which often appears in his readings of the novel, is important here. By roundedness, Lukács means the community-oriented and heterogeneous life of characters in the epics, which is now precluded by the complexities of modern civilisation and by the mystification of life under bourgeois capitalism, and which the novelist seeks to uncover and shape through the means of aesthetics: ‘The novel seeks, by giving form, to uncover and construct the concealed totality of life’.⁵³ Lukács understands totality as:

[T]he formative prime reality of every individual phenomenon [which] implies that something close within itself can be completed; completed because everything occurs within it, nothing is excluded from it and nothing points at a higher reality outside it; completed because everything within it ripens to its own perfection and, by attaining itself, submits to limitation’.⁵⁴

Totality is an organic development of the structure of society uncovered by art; but by no means is this totality a reductive homogenisation of elements. There is a ‘paradoxical fusion of heterogeneous and discrete components into an organic whole which is then abolished over and over again’.⁵⁵ The realist novel achieves totality through repeatedly bringing and cancelling the organicity of these paradoxical and disparate elements in its use of the devices of irony and narrative perspective, as well as the other features of reflection, mood, chorus/minor characters, etc.⁵⁶ For Lukács, unlike Watt, realism is not a set of formal techniques or a method of producing

⁵³ Lukács, *Theory*, p. 60.

⁵⁴ *Ibid*, p. 34.

⁵⁵ *Ibid*, p. 84

⁵⁶ *Ibid*, p. 92; despite the more doctrinaire and strident temper of his writing in later years, Lukács’ belief in the roundedness of life, in the possibility through art and aesthetics to uncover the historical conditions of society, and in the essentially historical impulse of realism, never lost track. That is why his celebration of Tolstoy’s realism would also emphasise the ‘indissoluble’ character in the writer, where disparate elements would not always harmoniously converge. This is also why a more polemical and narrower take on realism in *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism* would include the ‘realistic potential’ in Franz Kafka, where the nightmarish and improbable statements would be read not as a ‘straightforward anti-realism, but a dialectical process in which realism of detail negates the reality described’. See Lukács, *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism*, trans. by John and Necke Mander (London: Merlin Press, 1962). For his uneasy engagement with ETA Hoffmann, see the essay ‘Marx and Engels on Aesthetics’, in *Writer and Critic and Other Essays*, trans. by Arthur D. Kahn (New York: Grosset and Dunlop, 1971), pp. 61-88 (especially pp. 75-80). On Kafka, see ‘Franz Kafka or Thomas Mann’ in *The Meaning*, pp. 47-92. For his somewhat harsh and seemingly uninformed criticism of Chinese theatrical realism or the realism of Rabindranath Tagore, see *Studies in European Realism* (p. 132) and the review essay of Tagore’s *Ghare Baire (The Home and the World)*, pp. 8-11. On Tolstoy, see the long essay ‘Tolstoy and the Development of Russian Realism’, in *Studies*, pp. 126-206.

verisimilitude, but rather a historical process which is forged through a writer's deep historical consciousness and his/her commitment to uncovering the economic, political, and social forces influencing an individual's feelings, decisions, and actions.⁵⁷

Note that both Williams and Lukács point at the processual/compositional character of realism. Note also that they are both speaking of the essentially unstable, heterogeneous, and paradoxical nature of the real and the realistic (despite it being superficially understood as lifelike/photographic, etc.) within realism. However, neither of them offers any specific thoughts on the use of mode here. Irony, satire, pastoral, and so on, are presupposed as a novel's form-giving element. Rather, these are the modes through which realism's formal shape is achieved, and through which form appears to be a dynamic aesthetic category. A realist work does not simply imitate the 'world' (in an uncritical mimetic sense); but 'registers' it. The word 'register' includes the dual meaning of historical/bureaucratic registration ('to record; to set down [facts, names, etc.] in writing, especially accurately or officially') and of mediated reproduction ('to record in one's mind, heart, or memory; to become aware of, to notice properly').⁵⁸ Modes are chosen to respond to the historical specificity of a period or a crisis-based event, and to represent these specificities adequately. As I will argue in the thesis, the difference between a famine-based novel and a contemporary or starvation-based one does not lie in their realism, if we read realism as the commitment to describing and demystifying social-historical forces. They lie in the use of modes. Irony and caustic humour in the registration of a catastrophic crisis is a mode of expression; metafiction is another mode. They do not exist exclusively in a narrative; there can be different modes used within a predominant ironic mode. In fact, in many catastrophe-based realist works, modes shift somewhat quickly in order to register the nature of violence adequately: from documentary to gothic, fantastic to

⁵⁷ Lukács writes in *The Historical Novel*: '[The] historical sense, [which is] already present in practice, of the possibility of generalizing the historical peculiarity of the immediate present, which had been correctly observed by instinct, characterizes the position which the great social novel of England occupies in the development of our problem. It drew the attention of writers to the concrete (i.e., historical) significance of time and place, to social conditions and so on, it created the realistic, literary means of expression for portraying this spatiotemporal (i.e. historical) character of people and their circumstances. But this [...] was a product of realist instinct and did not amount to a clear understanding of history as a process, of history as the concrete precondition of the present'. See *The Historical Novel*, trans. by Hannah and Stanley Mitchell (London: Merlin Press, 1962), p. 18.

⁵⁸ 'Register', Oxford English Dictionary Online, University of Warwick Library Database, <http://0-www.oed.com.pugwash.lib.warwick.ac.uk/view/Entry/161294?rskey=lsIjPJ&result=3#eid> [accessed 24 April, 2017].

social realist, etc. These historically specific, unstable, and heterogeneous modes transform the realism of these event-based novels into a heterogeneous, experimental, and ‘modernistic’ form.

The divide between realism and modernism has come to be questioned in recent years, but mode has not received sufficient attention. In the volume *Adventures in Realism*, which pays close attention to the self-conscious, experimental, and modernist character of realism,⁵⁹ Fredric Jameson tells us that since realism is used to represent immediate social crises and greater historical shifts, the established realist modes gradually come to seem less vital (‘limited and ossified’ in his words).⁶⁰ They are then understood as unable to register deeper structural changes, ‘the ongoing revolution’ or ‘some transitory moment in history’, and turn into ‘targets for the defamiliarizations of the various emergent modernisms, which stigmatize their conventions in the form of satire or absorb and sublimate their narratives into generalized allusions’.⁶¹ He reads *Ulysses* as a ‘compendium of these residual realist narrative lines and as an extraordinary new combinatory play with such residues’.⁶² This is also the point that Joe Cleary makes in his introduction to a 2012 issue of *Modern Language Quarterly* on ‘peripheral realisms’.⁶³ Realism and modernism are not oppositional literary forms, but expansions of, and reworking on, the same form produced and qualified by historical shifts in the world-system: ‘nineteenth-century realism already contained latent modernisms that broke strongly to the fore only in conditions of systemic crisis and that twentieth-century modernisms may equally have retained latent realisms that may yet find novel articulations in new media or new generic modalities in further moments of crisis’.⁶⁴ Jameson adds in the same issue that

⁵⁹ *Adventures in Realism*, ed. by Matthew Beaumont (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007). Beaumont tells us that the features that the postmodernists celebrate in narratives – self-consciousness, parody, pastiche, irony – are formative of realism. Realist writers employed a number of experimentations within the form both from the acute awareness of the slipperiness of language and literary devices, and in order to capture the shifting historical impulse of the age. Beaumont offers the working definition that realism is ‘the assumption that it is possible, through the act of representation, in one semiotic code or another, to provide cognitive as well as imaginative access to a material, historical reality that, though irreducibly mediated by human consciousness, and of course by language, is nonetheless independent of it’ (p. 2).

⁶⁰ Fredric Jameson, ‘A Note on Literary Realism in Conclusion’, in *Adventures*, pp. 261-71 (p. 261); for an elaborate reading on this, see his *The Antinomies of Realism* (London: Verso, 2013), especially the chapter, ‘Realism and the Dissolution of Genre’, pp. 138-62.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 266.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 267.

⁶³ Joe Cleary, ‘Realism after Modernism and the Literary World-System’, in ‘Peripheral Realism’, ed. by Joe Cleary, Jed Esty and Collen Lye, *Modern Language Quarterly*, 73.3 (2012), 255-68.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 268; in this context, also see the recent issue of ‘Worlding Realisms’, ed. by Lauren M. E. Goodlad in the journal *Novel*, especially the article, ‘Realism Wars’ by Jed Esty, where Esty argues, like Cleary, that the shifting imperial structures of domination in the early twentieth century, from

Third-World writers, the majority of whom sympathise with the Left, predominantly use a realist style, while the constantly modernising impulse of their countries also constitutes and shapes this style. A genuine realism, Jameson follows Lukács in suggesting, is thus ‘a discovery process, which, with its emphasis on the new and the hitherto unreported, unrepresented, and unseen, and its notorious subversion of inherited ideas and genres [...] is in fact itself a kind of modernism, if not the latter’s first form’.⁶⁵ He terms this realism a ‘modernistic realism’, which uses realism’s conventions and then undermines them.

I will argue in the thesis that realism achieves this ‘modernistic’ end predominantly through the use of modes. The ‘modernising impulse’ for a recently decolonised Third-World country, dependent on the First-World for economic reasons, often results in catastrophes: famines, insurgencies, counter-insurgencies, civil war, etc. These catastrophes are, thus, historical and global in their formation. But they are also specific in orientation and local in their impact. Novels capture this relation through the use of modes. A famine, for instance, may have global-historical (colonial) factors responsible for it, but the specificity of Bengali history and culture in the late-colonial period will have vital influence in the literary registration of the disaster. While there may be stylistic and formal convergences in the late-colonial based novels on famines across the world, the cultural and historical contingencies, as I will show in the next chapter, will also be notable in their shaping of the literary form. My contention is that: if form is a commitment to understanding how historical processes operate and how the world can be registered in a work, it is mode that offers the framework to do so, and retains the heterogeneity of perspectives and the element of self-reflexivity in fictional writing. It is through the dialectic of form and mode that the dialectic of historical crises and events is registered, that epistemology and aesthetics become combined and enabling. I am calling this framework of realism, which is shaped by culturally specific use of modes and produced by a specific historical/catastrophic conjuncture, as ‘crisis realism’. I will note here realism’s

Britain to the USA (and shifting now towards Asia) have caused writers and critics to see realism as imperialistic and programmatic, and modernism and adventure fiction as its emancipatory opposite. The recent world financial crisis and the contemporary rise of realist fiction may be the beginning of the next phase of realism until the form is understood as saturated and programmatic with the further shift of the imperialist domain. Realism and modernism, according to Esty, are less about aesthetic differences than about geopolitically shaped expressions. Esty, ‘Realism Wars’, *Novel: A Forum for Fiction*, 49. 2 (2016), 316-42.

⁶⁵ Fredric Jameson, ‘Antinomies of the Realism-Modernism Debate’, in ‘Peripheral Realisms’, ed. by Joe Cleary, Jed Esty and Colleen Lye, *Modern Language Quarterly*, 73.3 (2012), 475-85 (p. 476).

modernistic elements in late-colonial Indian works, and then move on to my final observations on form and mode and on crisis realism.

In the colonies, realism has always been experimental and modernistic. As Roberto Schwarz has shown, realism was imported and used with irony and parodic elements in the slave-holding economy of Brazil.⁶⁶ In the context of India, as Meenakshi Mukherjee (1985) writes, the colonial novel was influenced by European values of individualism, rationality, historical consciousness, and so on; but those did not turn the colonial novel into a case of derivative realism.⁶⁷ Because India was predominantly an agricultural country, the main cultural products were oral in form – e.g. *jatra* (folk theatre) and *kathakata* (oral recital of the purana stories) – which frequently exploited the topics and narrative elements of the mythological and the supernatural.⁶⁸ Many of the novelists appear to deploy a mythological temporal framework, and make heavy uses of allegory, symbol, and fable in their works, where rational-linear progress and cyclical narration converge in the novel of development (*Bildungsroman*).⁶⁹ In a recent study (2012), Ulka Anjaria revisits some of these contexts for a thesis on realism's aesthetic capacities in the late-colonial period.⁷⁰ Anjaria observes that writers who used the realist form were agonisingly conscious of India's problematic entrance into historical modernity, where anticipation of a redemptive future and the disillusionment of the present were interconnected. Realism had this paradoxical aspect of the impossibility of transparency and utopian futuristic possibility:

At one level this paradox appears simply in aesthetic gaps: works that are unrealistic, characterization that is unconvincing, plots that are episodic,

⁶⁶ He calls literary form an abstract of specific social relationships through which the process of transformation of social questions into 'properly literary ones' is realised. See 'The Importing of the Novel to Brazil and its Contradiction in the Work of Alencar', in *Misplaced Ideas: Essays on Brazilian Culture* (London: Verso, 1992), pp. 41-77 (p. 53).

⁶⁷ Meenakshi Mukherjee, *Realism and Reality: Novel and Society in India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 4.

⁶⁸ Ibid, p. 56; Mukherjee writes that it is important to 'examine the synthesis of borrowed literary form and indigenous aesthetic – as well as cultural expectations – in order to determine the extent to which the form has undergone mutation in the process', p. 18.

⁶⁹ Indeed, she also finds extra-literary co-ordinates – such as Indian philosophy, religion, and the moralistic discourses – as well as Indian concepts of history and fiction, as discursively interconnected rather than antagonistic. It is necessary to mention here, as Supriya Chaudhuri has recently argued, that the Bengali novel was born as a mode of satirical commentary on the imitations of the British and Western cultures and on the lifestyles by the Bengali native elites and the nouveau riche. Chaudhuri, 'The Bengali Novel', in *The Cambridge Companion to Modern Indian Culture*, ed. by Vasudha Dalmia and Rashmi Sadana (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 99-123 (p. 102).

⁷⁰ Ulka Anjaria, *Realism in the Twentieth-Century Indian Novel: Colonial Difference and Literary Form* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

writing that is overdramatic, and so on. Seen from the perspective of desire, however, these so-called failings can be reinterpreted as representing the coincidence of richness and simultaneous impossibility, of mimesis and metafictionality, that constitute the complex coordinates of realism in the colony'.⁷¹

Through the use of allegory, symbol, or 'metafictionality', Anjaria adds, the writers were politically engaging with the pressing issues of the period and breaking open the nationalistic hegemonies of meaning and discourse that clouded critical judgement.

Priyamvada Gopal offers a more historically grounded and nuanced understanding of the period in context in her use of 'critical realism'. In her book, *Literary Radicalism in India* (2005),⁷² Gopal writes that the publication of 'Angarey' (1932) – a collection of stories that challenged orthodox notions of community, religion and gender – and the formation of the All India Progressive Writers Association were pivotal for the building of a critical spirit for decolonisation, as opposed to the bourgeois-nationalist discourses of harmony and inclusion. This critical spirit was the product of the country's particular late-colonial historical conjuncture. Borrowing from Gramsci's notion of the 'terrain of the conjunctural', 'where incurable structural contradictions have revealed themselves (reached maturity)',⁷³ she argues that, in the context of India's transition from colony to nationhood, the oppositional political force should not be understood only as a passive revolution of Gandhian nationalism, which followed a politics of manoeuvre, neutralising political heterogeneities and promoting a discourse of consensus. Instead, this oppositional force encompasses numerous acts of peasant militancy and labour activism during the period:

The conjunctural terrain of Indian nation formation in the decades just prior to independence in 1947 is marked by the gathering of various forces of opposition. Their activities ranged from trade union activism to peasant agitation, and from the secularisation of state institutions to the proliferation of diverse women's organisations. Though inflected by the struggle between British imperialism and Indian nationalism, the activities undertaken by these various forces suggest that a multiplicity of projects were to be undertaken as the transition from colony to nation took place. Gramsci's contention that

⁷¹ Ibid, p. 15.

⁷² Priyamvada Gopal, *Literary Radicalism in India: Gender, Nation and the Transition to Independence* (London: Routledge, 2005).

⁷³ Ibid, p. 18.

oppositional forces on the terrain of the conjunctural 'seek to demonstrate that the necessary and sufficient conditions already exist to make possible, and hence imperative, the accomplishment of certain historical tasks' is borne out at this historical conjuncture.⁷⁴

This offers a clear picture of the socio-politically tempestuous nature of the times. According to Gopal, writers and filmmakers such as Anand, Premchand, Ismat Chughtai, Sa'adat Hasan Manto, K. A. Abbas, and others were aware of the plural and heterogeneous character of the conjuncture, as well as the tremendous political energies of the period. They argued to retain political and literary heterogeneity in the programmatic (Party-line) use of politics and literature. Their range of experiments in writing and artistic production were meant to preserve literature's critical exploration of the socio-historical dimensions and its 'ironic commitment to truth'. From this, Gopal contends that realism of the age should be understood as 'less a specific aesthetic technique than a philosophy that brings together an affective sense of justice, fairness and harmony with an understanding of all that violates that sense'.⁷⁵ This definition is powerful as it grasps both the political dimensions of fairness, rights, and entitlement in the practice of realism and in the awareness of their violation in everyday life. Critical realism in such a form appears to express a consciousness of critical solidarity. My readings of the event-based novels also find a similar critical awareness and visions of solidarity. At the same time, during periods of catastrophe and wide social violence, such as the Partition or the famine, socially committed writers have to also address the questions of documentation, analysis, puzzle of incomprehension, and above all, reflection on the act of representation itself. In such a formation, critical realism, I think, does not remain a choice or a question of balance between philosophy and aesthetics techniques. The techniques shape the mode and constitute the philosophy of fractured times. Manto's Partition stories that Gopal analyses can be used as an example here. Gopal tells us of the difference in critical commentary as well as in the framing of narration in Manto's pre- and post-Partition stories.⁷⁶ In reading one of the post-Partition stories, 'Sau Kaindal Power ka Bulb' ('A

⁷⁴ Ibid, p. 20.

⁷⁵ Ibid, p. 27.

⁷⁶ Manto's pre-Partition stories are marked by 'male sexuality and masculinity, on the one hand, and patriarchy and the exploitation of women on the other', while his post-Partition fiction appears 'to bring together psychobiography and historical analysis, probing the wounded recesses where individual and community colluded in doing violence to themselves and to others in the cause of self-assertion'. Ibid, p. 93.

100 Candle-Power Bulb'), she notes that Manto, instead of critiquing exploitation of, or speaking fondly about, prostitutes (which he did in his pre-Partition fiction), presents a nameless and stubborn female prostitute who does not want to be understood or sympathised. As the protagonist, sympathetic to her situation, decides to kill the pimp, he discovers in a 'nightmarish' scene that she has already killed him and that he is not needed as her fantasied protector. Gopal offers a historical materialist reading of the ending:

It would seem reasonable then to read the story as the critique to end all critiques: a farewell to literary arms and the writerly aspirations to a realism that would let the light of day upon the filth and grime that the rest of society refuses to see. That was obviously not to be the case, certainly in terms of Manto's career and continued output. But the argument can certainly be made that the experience of Partition and the devastation that followed chastened the writer and made him aware of the relative modesty of his own and other literary endeavours. It appears, in this instance, to have occasioned an acknowledgement of the limits of what he could, in fact, explain and effect in relation to social transformation.⁷⁷

As I have been arguing, an event of catastrophic nature creates a new consciousness within writers which is not entirely dis severed from the consciousness of the past, but which requires improvisation of existing techniques as well as importation of new modes of expression, and new strategies of narration for adequate representation. Gopal's reading here draws mainly upon sexuality and gender; in many of his post-Partition stories Manto also focuses on the aspect of madness, and of losing sense and speech acts (which can certainly be read through the lens of masculinity and sexuality). In two of the stories, 'In the Name of God' and 'Open It!' Manto shows how the main characters, respectively a mother and a father who have lost their children due to the violence, are completely at odds as much with themselves as with the institutions that try to assuage them and create an aura of normality in these times of absolute madness: police station, prison, and medical centre. Indeed, one of Manto's iconic stories, 'Toba Tek Singh', is about lunatics in the asylums of Hindustan and Pakistan who, after an order from the governments of these newly formed countries, are about to be exchanged to their family's country. One lunatic, Bishan Singh, who had some landed property in a town called Toba Tek Singh, comes to know that his

⁷⁷ Ibid, p. 118.

land now belongs to Pakistan, while his Sikh family has shifted to Hindustan. On the day of exchange, Bishan Singh, who has been in the asylum for the last fifteen years and been himself named Toba Tek Singh after his endless questions about this place, resists his hand-over and takes a spot in the middle of the borders of the two countries, resolute on his decision. The next day he dies there. The final lines are striking: ‘Over there, behind the barbed wires was Hindustan. Over here, behind the identical wires lay Pakistan. In between on a bit of land that had no name, lay Toba Tek Singh’.⁷⁸ Consider the restraint in emotion in the language: Manto uses caustic humour throughout the narration to suggest the farcical and meaningless nature of the situation. The case of a brief moment of pathos only aggravates the caustic nature: that human bodies have become expendable now, violable and can be killed with impunity, and human community, belonging, and ancestral place have also acquired a contingent meaning. In dying on a land that does not belong to anyone, Toba Tek Singh and his eponymous place appear to declare their resistance against violent disciplining and mapping, and against coercive accommodation of their identity. This style of narration also appears in the story, ‘The Dog of Tetwal’, in which a stray dog is given national identities by the armies of Pakistan and Hindustan, by stringing cardboard pieces that hold their nations’ names around its neck. The dog is killed in the end by both armies for not being loyal enough to either nation. Manto’s juxtaposition of the merciless act of dog-killing with the soldiers’ sentimental nostalgia for their homes and families and the beautiful spring in the surrounding mountains serves to show that the dog is just a victim of sport, or rather, that patriotism is a murderous sport itself.⁷⁹ The heavily symbolic nature of both stories cannot be overlooked either. The many scenes of violence that characterise the Partition, the madness of killing, and the proliferating case of men and women (and nonhuman animals), whose bodies are now suspended in the middle of chartered territories both geographically and socially, who have lost speech and communicability, or who are puzzled as to why they committed those gruesome acts of violence, compel Manto to take up a narrative mode that is caustic, bitter, reflexive and deeply satiric, where emotions and analysis merge, although not without restraint. As Gopal correctly notes, there is a ‘fusion between reason and

⁷⁸ Sa’adat Hasan Manto, ‘Toba Tek Singh’, in *Black Margins: Sa’adat Hasan Manto Stories*, ed. by M. Asaduddin (New Delhi: Katha, 2001), pp. 212-20 (p. 220).

⁷⁹ Ibid, pp. 188-99.

emotion’ in Manto’s post-Partition stories in contrast to the pre-Partition ones, which ‘tended to dichotomise emotion and intellect, or metonymy and metaphor’.⁸⁰

The tendency to combine analysis with affect appears to be a characteristic style of narration of the events, which are disastrous in nature and when narration is done from a close distance with them. As we will see in Chapter Two, Bhabani Bhattacharya, writing at a time soon after the famine, adopts an analytical-affective mode. Amalendu Chakraborty, however, takes up a metafictional mode (through a film about the famine) to understand the famine conditions in India’s postcolonial rural society. I will show through a reading of Kamala Markandaya how these two modes differ from the social realist mode based generally on the conditions of poverty and scarcity. I will ask whether we can read a ‘disaster realism’ in Bhattacharya’s and Chakraborty’s works. The Naxalbari movement, which I will focus on in Chapter Three, extracts a quest mode from Mahasweta Devi, and an urban fantastic mode from Nabarun Bhattacharya, who was writing years after the event on the possible unreal urban guerrilla warfare. Together they are read as constituting ‘critical irrationalism’. In Chapter Four, I will discuss two predominant modes that authors deploy in order to represent the violence committed by the state during the constitutional emergency: extra-realist and critical realist. Here, analysis will draw upon works by Salman Rushdie, O. V. Vijayan, Arun Joshi, Nayantara Sahgal, and Rohinton Mistry for an argument on ‘emergency realism’. I will argue that, together, these catastrophe-based realisms constitute the framework of crisis realism in postcolonial India.

Before turning to the chapters themselves, I would like to make two final notes. First, this thesis is in no way an exhaustive reading of Indian novels of catastrophe and crisis. Neither does it claim that these events together form an exclusive lens through which the nature of Indian postcolonial modernity is to be perceived. One can choose a number of events, such as the Partition, the Indo-Pakistan War, the Bhopal Gas Disaster, and so on. By selecting these events, what I will try to understand is the relation between (colonial) structures of domination, the conditions of life and living for the oppressed and the marginalised in postcolonial times, and the practices and discourses of resistance from below. This is why my studies begin historically from a catastrophic event in the late-colonial period (the Bengal famine) and literarily from

⁸⁰ Gopal, *Radicalism*, p. 119.

the postcolonial period (Bhabani Bhattacharya's 1947 novel). Through these selections, I have set myself to inquire into what literary form can *say* about these catastrophic conditions and their traumatising futures, the 'continuous' nature of historical crisis. Why is a mode chosen? What does this choice suggest about the reception and registration of an event, of critical solidarity, or about an author's social values? What can a reading of crisis realism tell us about Indian postcolonial society in general? Second, although there has been a large and complex body of literary works on all of these three events, there is little secondary literature available on them. In many cases, the literary texts are not widely circulated either. While authors such as Rushdie and Mistry enjoy a commanding reputation in the field of postcolonial literary studies, Sahgal, Markandaya, Joshi, and Bhabani Bhattacharya are relatively neglected. Devi has only a handful of works translated into English; and texts by Nabarun Bhattacharya, Chakraborty, and Vijayan are hardly known to a wide Indian audience, let alone a global one. It has been a challenging task to read them and bring them together for a study of historical crisis and postcolonial modernity. This task has also been motivated by the desire to retrieve a body of writers who have been either unjustly neglected or violently displaced and relegated to the margins for a certain institutionalised politics of the field. Through this selection of reading, the thesis aims to offer a counter-genealogy for the postcolonial Indian novel, one that is able to address the questions of historical conditionality of the texts, as well as their nuanced and interrogative uses of literary realism.

CHAPTER TWO

Disaster and Realism: The Novels of the 1943 Bengal Famine

The 1943 Bengal famine occurred at a time when India was suffering from the turbulence of the Second World War and the anti-colonial Quit India agitations. It took the lives of nearly three million people, and aggravated the crisis so much that post-independence India (1947–) could hardly recover from the slow violence of starvation and malnutrition. The famine also gave rise to a number of literary and artistic works, some of which were published much before the scholarly studies began on the disaster. Through a study of two novels, one written in the immediate aftermath of the famine and the other long after the disaster, I would like to show how this literature engages with questions of the agrarian crisis in late-colonial India, with the role of colonial governance and capitalism in the birth of the famine, and with the crisis of starvation and slow violence in the postcolonial period. I will argue that it is mainly through an eclectic and diverse use of literary realism that the novels register the disaster and its consequences. With brief observations on a few novels based generally on scarcity and starvation in post-independence India, I will show how disaster-based works compel a different shaping of novel writing and form, and substantially broaden the meaning and practice of literary realism.

By the 1940s, famines had become commonplace in Bengal. Kali Charan Ghosh in *Famines in Bengal* (1944) traced the genealogy of Bengal famines. For lack of documentation or for a better prevent system, the Mughal era (between 1630 and 1770) showed a strikingly fewer number of famines (only three). On the other hand, Ghosh enumerated twenty-two documented famines, ‘excluding severe scarcities’, between 1770 and 1943, i.e. the time period of British colonialism in India, of which the 1943-1944 famine was the ‘worst’.⁸¹ The official study of the 1943-1944 Bengal famine, published by the Famine Inquiry Commission in 1945, maintained that reasons such as poor monsoon, drought and cyclone, and insufficient production of

⁸¹ Kali Charan Ghosh, *Famines in Bengal, 1770-1943* (Calcutta: Indian Associated Publishing, 1944), p. 3.

food crops were responsible for it.⁸² But scholars like B. M. Bhatia and Amartya Sen have subsequently showed that the famine had direct links with the conditions of war and war-time capitalism. Bhatia (1991) used a range of government data and index charts to show that there had been a considerable decline in employment and per capita income since the early years of the twentieth century, which was followed by high inflation in the post-First World War period.⁸³ Between 1938 and 1943, there were crop failures, ‘together with dislocation of normal channels of distribution of supplies (due to the Second World War) and tendency on the part of the consumers, producers, and traders to hoard the supplies’, which resulted in an unprecedented rise in prices and decrease in marketable surplus.⁸⁴ The colonial administration was unprepared for this catastrophic conjunction and took no action to control prices, to combat corruption among private traders and government trading agents, or to provide quick relief measures.⁸⁵ In *Poverty and Famines* (1981), Amartya Sen also raised many of these issues, including the ‘boat denial’ and ‘scorched earth’ policies, namely, to burn all boats along the Bengal border and to forcibly extract rice from the peasants for fear of a Japanese invasion from the East.⁸⁶ For Sen, the ‘vigorous speculations and panic hoardings [...] encouraged by administrative chaos’, ‘the prohibition of export of cereal in general and rice in particular’ from other provinces, the ‘uneven expansion in incomes and purchasing powers’, and the decline of demand in crafts, utility or luxury goods (which had actively produced an underclass of artisans, fisherfolk, agricultural labourers) created a sharp discrepancy between the actual production of food-grains and their market release, making it impossible for the poor and landless labourers to purchase rice and other essential commodities. Sen termed it the failure of ‘entitlement’ or the loss of the right to buy.⁸⁷ Later studies of the disaster found a number of related and other reasons for the disaster – from the collapse of social

⁸² See ‘Report on Bengal’, in *Famine Inquiry Commission* (New Delhi: Government of India, 1945), pp. 40-82 (pp. 76-77).

⁸³ Bhatia’s work was published in 1968, before the noted studies on the famine by Sen and others had appeared. The work was revised and expanded in the 1991 edition. B. M. Bhatia, *Famines in India: A Study in Some Aspects of the Economic History of India with Special Reference to Food Problem, 1860-1990* (Delhi: Konark Publishers, 1991), pp. 312-20.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 323.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 333-39.

⁸⁶ Amartya Sen, *Poverty and Famines: An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), pp. 67-68.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 70, pp. 76-78.

relations, colonial land policies, to fascism, imperialism, and Churchill's political strategies.⁸⁸

The famine created a huge social crisis. In his anthropological study of the famine (1949), Tarak Chandra Das recorded the influx of the destitute to the city: 'By the end of July 1943, the streets of Calcutta began to ring with the piteous cry of the people who had come to the Second City of the British Empire for a morsel of food'.⁸⁹ He went on to record in the first ten pages of his book the horrible living conditions endured by these people: defecation in the open streets, widespread diseases, competition for food within as well as between families, consumption of garbage, unconsciousness, or even 'death by starvation'.⁹⁰ Kali Charan Ghosh dedicated a chapter in his book to the journalistic accounts of starvation and death in the villages, of migration of whole populations to the city, of their tired bodies being eaten alive by jackals and dogs, of the barbaric fights between humans for a morsel of food from the dump areas.⁹¹ These everyday incidents, along with the atmosphere of fear and violence wrought by the Second World War and the nationalist movements (Quit India agitations of 1942), produced a social crisis so deep that literary works of the period could hardly avoid the phenomenon.⁹² Bhabani Bhattacharya, who wrote two famine

⁸⁸ See these works for a further study of the famine: Paul R. Greenough, *Prosperity and Misery in Modern Bengal: The Famine of 1943-1944* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982); David Arnold, *Famine: Social Crisis and Historical Change* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988); Madhusree Mukherjee, *Churchill's Secret War: The British Empire and the Ravaging of India during World War II* (New York: Basic Books, 2010); and more recently, Janam Mukherjee, *Hungry Bengal: War, Famine and the End of Empire* (London: Hurst, 2015).

⁸⁹ Tarak Chandra Das, *Bengal Famine: As Revealed in a Survey of the Destitutes of Calcutta* (Calcutta: Calcutta University Press, 1949), p. 2.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

⁹¹ Ghosh, *Famines*, pp. 85-95.

⁹² A cursory look at the volume, variety, and richness of literary works produced in the immediate aftermath of the famine serves the point. There are plays by Bijan Bhattacharya, Sachin Sengupta, Tulsi Lahiri, and Banaful; novels by Tarashankar Bandyopadhyay, Bibhutibhusan Bandyopadhyay, Manik Bandyopadhyay Bhabani Bhattacharya, Gopal Halder, and Sarojkumar Raychowdhuri; short stories by Ela Sen, Parimal Goswami, Manoj Basu, and Prabodhkumar Sanyal; poetry by Sukanta Bhattacharya, Amar Mitra, Premendra Mitra, and Bishnu Dey; songs by Jyotirindra Maitra, Hemango Biswas, and Salil Chowdhury; choreography by Shanti Bardhan and Shombhu Bhattacharya; paintings and sketches by Somenath Hore, Zainul Abedin, and Chitta Prasad; photography by Sunil Janah; and films by K. A. Abbas, Ritwik Ghatak, and Mrinal Sen. For surveys of the literature and recent critical engagement with the famine from the perspectives of history, gender, nation, etc. see these works: Margaret Kelleher, *The Feminization of Famine* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1997); Srimanjari, 'War, famine, and the Popular Perception in Bengali Literature, 1939-1945', in *Issues in Modern History*, ed. by Biswamay Pati (Delhi: Popular Prakashan, 2000), pp. 258-90; Kashinath Chattopadhyay, *Upasi Bangla: Samayikapatre Pancaser Manwantar (Famished Bengal: The 1350s Famine in Periodicals)* (Bakharahata: Seribana, 2007); and Rajender Kaur, 'The Vexed Question of Peasant Passivity: Nationalist Discourse and the Debate on Peasant Resistance in Literary Representations of the Bengal Famine of 1943', *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 50.4 (2014), pp. 269-81. For a general reading of

novels in English, stated in an interview: ‘The emotional stirrings I felt (more than two million men, women and children died of slow starvation amid a man-made scarcity) were a sheer compulsion to creativity. The result was the novel *So Many Hungers!*’.⁹³ However, writers of the time like Bhattacharya did not confine themselves only to representation of the famine and its violence; they also addressed the complex issue of *how* to represent the famine meaningfully within a particular literary genre or form. Does the catastrophic nature of the famine call for the production of a new form? What would be the mode to shape the form? How does one deal with the historical questions regarding the genesis of the disaster *and* allow for the possibility of a catharsis of human tragedy and trauma? Bijan Bhattacharya, who wrote the first popular and critically successful famine play, *Nabanna* (1944; *New Harvest*), expressed these concerns in an interview: ‘I saw the people dying like cats and dogs in the streets of Calcutta muttering, fumbling [...] Could I reach my ears forth to them? This was my only thought. I would go to many places and sit thinking: What to write? What to do? How to do? Just to gauge the depth of their suffering? While going on like this, I thought that if I wrote a drama and actually produced it, would it be worthwhile?’⁹⁴ I will argue that these questions, compulsions, and related improvisations of the literary form were a way to understand what a disaster was and what was specific about famine as a disaster. These improvisations were also influenced by the urgent need to find a ‘realistic’ form that could address the suffering and tragedy, and could help release the pain that the disaster and the socio-political turbulence of the period gave birth to. Before reading the famine-based novels, I will offer a critical framework of how disasters might shape literary form in order to understand how the novels, produced in a historically specific conjuncture, both interrogate and enrich the framework through their experimental use of modes.

history, politics, art and literature of the decade, see *Calcutta: The Stormy Decades*, ed. by Tanika Sarkar and Sekhar Bandyopadhyay (Delhi: Social Sciences Press, 2015).

⁹³ Bhabani Bhattacharya, ‘Interview with Bhabani Bhattacharya’ *Mahfil: Journal of South Asian Literature*, 5.1/2 (1968-1969), 43-48 (p. 43).

⁹⁴ Quoted in Rustom Bharucha, *Rehearsals of Revolution: The Political Theater of Bengal* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1984), p. 45.

Disaster, Famine, and Realism

The Oxford English Dictionary defines disaster as an ill-starred event (disaster deriving from the word ‘astro’ or star): ‘anything that befalls of ruinous or distressing nature; a sudden or great misfortune, mishap, or misadventure; a calamity’.⁹⁵ Disasters are generally understood to be sudden and natural events, and have long been interpreted as meteorological/geological hazards, or as events linked specifically with organisational behaviours or risk assessment policies and practices.⁹⁶ With Kenneth Hewitt’s pioneering study on vulnerability, and later studies on anthropological, ideological, and social forces responsible for disasters, the paradigm of disaster studies shifted from sudden and natural hazards to outcomes of historical processes. These perspectives, anthropologist Oliver-Smith writes, have broadened the field and informed us that disasters should not be understood as exclusive natural phenomena but as ‘exosemiotic agents’, produced by the material practices of human beings and the levels of vulnerability and geographical violence, and implicated in the ideological discourses and perceptions of a place.⁹⁷ Cultural studies scholar Eric Cazdyn writes that disaster, in the capitalist world-system, should not be understood as ‘natural’; they are rather ‘social in in genesis – products of human choices, political systems, even cultural assumptions’.⁹⁸ Disasters are never sudden: people, especially specialists in the disaster fields, are aware of their impending occurrence. They are produced by the crisis that is in-built within the capitalist system: ‘systems are structured so that crises will occur,’⁹⁹ a point concurred by Naomi Klein in her influential book, *The Shock Doctrine* (2007). For Klein, amongst the most pernicious of contemporary ideologies is the understanding ‘that the triumph of deregulated capitalism has been born of freedom, that unfettered free markets go hand in hand with democracy’. Instead, she shows ‘that this fundamentalist form of capitalism has consistently been midwived by the most brutal forms of coercion [...] escalating levels of violence and ever larger

⁹⁵ ‘Disaster’, *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, Warwick Library Database <<http://0-www.oed.com.pugwash.lib.warwick.ac.uk/view/Entry/53561?rskey=ch5Xei&result=1&isAdvanced=false#eid>> [accessed 18 Nov, 2016].

⁹⁶ For an anthropological introduction to disaster studies, see *Catastrophe and Culture: The Anthropology of Disaster*, ed. by Susanna M. Hoffmann and Anthony Oliver-Smith (Santa Fe: School of American Research Press, 2002).

⁹⁷ Anthony Oliver-Smith, ‘Theorizing Disaster: Nature, Power and Culture’, in *Catastrophe and Culture*, p. 41.

⁹⁸ Eric Cazdyn, ‘Disaster, Crisis, Revolution’, in ‘Disastrous Consequences’, ed. by Eric Cazdyn, *South Atlantic Quarterly* 106.4 (2007), 647-62 (p. 648).

⁹⁹ *Ibid*, p. 649.

disasters are required in order to reach the goal'.¹⁰⁰ The manufacturing of disasters comes from what Eric Cazdyn calls 'pre-emptive measures' taken by individual states to avert 'crises',¹⁰¹ such as the acts of the US and the UK in the Middle East in the wake of 9/11. War, drone strikes, and forced famines are part of these pre-emptive measures, which have destroyed the lives of millions, pushed countries into permanent states of war, and given birth to widespread religious and militant fundamentalisms.

These theoretical understandings of disaster as something historically, socially, and ideologically produced have initiated a close and productive dialogue between the fields of disaster studies and literary and cultural studies.¹⁰² In addition to finding out how literatures and cultures register disasters and their impacts, these studies have insightfully pointed out the link between a disaster's orientation and the formal pattern of a literary work. There are different kinds of disaster, such as 'slow' ones and 'rapid' ones in Oliver-Smith's terms,¹⁰³ which may arise from similar systemic pressures such as capitalism and colonialism but are different in nature, type, and consequence. Famine, for instance, unlike a cyclone, is not the result of slow, non-visible geological plate tectonic movements; nor is it only about immediate effects. It is both (tangibly) historical and immediate in reason and in effect. Historian David Arnold tells us that famine is a specific kind of disaster which has a long and tangible history of genesis. It is both an 'event', a rupture of a distinctive kind and period, and a 'structure' that places into relief 'a society's inner contradictions and inherent weaknesses'.¹⁰⁴ Like B. M. Bhatia, Arnold holds that the causes for the Bengal famine should not be located only in the immediate historical contexts of the war, but also in the longer trends such as late-colonial land policies, the decline of agriculture in the

¹⁰⁰ Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (London: Penguin, 2007), pp. 18-19.

¹⁰¹ Cazdyn, 'Disaster', p. 652.

¹⁰² In the field of literary-critical studies, apart from the works of Rob Nixon, Mark D. Anderson, and Upamanyu Pablo Mukherjee who will be discussed here, see Elizabeth DeLoughrey, *Routes and Roots: Navigating Caribbean and Pacific Island Literature* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2007); Imre Szeman, 'System Failure: Oil, Futurity, and the Anticipation of Disaster', *South Atlantic Quarterly* 106.4 (2007), pp. 807-23; Graeme Macdonald, 'The Resources of Fiction', *Reviews in Cultural Theory*, 4.2 (2013), pp. 1-24; 'Catastrophe and Environment', ed. by Anthony Carrigan, *Moving Worlds: Journal of Transcultural Writings*, 14.2 (2015), pp. 1-140.

¹⁰³ Hoffmann and Oliver-Smith, *Catastrophe*, p. 25.

¹⁰⁴ Arnold, *Famine*, p. 7; we ought to remember here Sumit Sarkar's arguments about how deindustrialisation and commercialisation of agriculture by the British for the production of cash crops in the late nineteenth century gave birth to a number of disasters.

province, the growing pressure of debt on peasants, and the subdivision of holdings, etc., which laid the ground for the ultimate crisis portended by mass starvation.¹⁰⁵

This line of argument is echoed in the literary critic Rob Nixon's work, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (2011), in which Nixon, like Arnold and Oliver-Smith, talks of two types of disasters: 'spectacular' disasters, such as nuclear disasters or earthquakes, and 'slow' or 'attritional' disasters, like malnutrition, toxic drifts, epidemics, etc.¹⁰⁶ Attritional disasters are those 'that overspill clear boundaries in time and space (and) are marked above all by displacement – temporal, geographical, rhetorical and above all technological displacements'.¹⁰⁷ In order to accommodate the nature of suffering over time and space, literary narratives of the attritional catastrophes undergo a significant stretch of their generic and stylistic codes and remodel the literary form (which Nixon shows through an astute study of literary works by Arundhati Roy, Wangari Mathaai, Mahasweta Devi, and others). Another literary scholar, Mark D. Anderson in *Disaster Writing* (2011), speaks of the relation between the nature of disaster and the *kind* of writing that disaster gives birth to: 'Disaster narratives that arise following a single powerful event [...] often mirror existing forms and draw on latent political narratives to endow the event with social meaning', while disaster that recurs over time 'often engender[s] its own aesthetics, allowing it to transcend its moment'.¹⁰⁸ Thus, the 'event' of an earthquake in Mexico generates the 'cronica' (journalistic) form composed of collage techniques and public forum comments,¹⁰⁹ while the structural/processual nature of the Great Drought of Brazil of 1877-1879 in the North-Eastern Sertão region produces a combination of naturalistic and journalistic prose styles in the idiom of Émile Zola (whose emphasis on literary writing as scientific documentation influenced early twentieth-century Brazilian works on this region).¹¹⁰ Nixon and Anderson here imply that the temporality of a disaster determines the uneven form of literature based on it. However, time is not the only determining factor in the shaping of literary form. Space is also important. Upamanyu Pablo Mukherjee notes in a study on famine, fevers, and

¹⁰⁵ Ibid, p. 41.

¹⁰⁶ Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013), p. 2.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid, p. 7.

¹⁰⁸ Mark D. Anderson, *Disaster Writing: The Cultural Politics of Catastrophe in Latin America* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2011), p. 22.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid, p. 165.

¹¹⁰ Ibid, p. 78.

other epidemics in Victorian India (2013) that the tropics, understood by the British imperialists as the ideological zone of disaster, compelled significant modifications within the existing genres of imperial travel writing, short stories, and the historical novel. There was a radical shift of literary modes between the gothic, the realist, the autobiographical, and the historical; and an unevenness of style, which exposed the contradictions and anxieties within the ‘palliative’ practices of the empire (i.e. imperialism as an act of care, a relief effort, to rescue the natives from themselves as well as from their disaster-stricken geography). In short, Mukherjee posits, “‘disaster environment’ demanded disaster styles of writing’.”¹¹¹

Disaster fiction has seldom been considered successful in literary terms. There is a dominant belief in critical and academic circles that disaster resists art, that a certain amount of time needs to pass before great art can be made as a response to disasters, or that novels written during disasters are mere journalistic interventions.¹¹² In these arguments, the question that remains unexplored is whether the stylistic and formal changes are compelled by a disaster-born urgency. What is expected of art set in a time of immense horror, with corpses and carcasses scattered everywhere? How to capture the immediate horror and situate the historical/analytical aspects? To engage with these aesthetic questions is at the same time to ask the historical ones: how was the famine manufactured? How was it seen by people or responded to? Or, how has the famine generated an enduring socio-political crisis in the postcolonial period? My contention here is that disaster writing or art should be understood broadly as expanded or re-purposed realism. My studies of novels and other kinds of literary works based on the 1943 Bengal famine show that the categories of disaster, more specifically famine here, and realism are interlinked. The primary reason for this claim is that, unlike Nixon’s understanding of famine as an attritional disaster, I find it to be simultaneously spectacular and attritional. The spectacular aspect of the event appears in its immediacy of devastation (starvation, everyday suffering, dying on the streets), while the attritional or slow aspect is understood in its temporal breadth, the slow

¹¹¹ Upamanyu Pablo Mukherjee, *Natural Disasters and Victorian Empire: Famines, Fevers and Literary Cultures of South Asia* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2013), p. 24.

¹¹² See Paul Varughese’s criticism of Bhabani Bhattacharya’s novel *So Many Hungers!*, qtd in Chandrasekharan, *Bhabani Bhattacharya* (New Delhi: Arnold-Heinemann, 1974), p. 56; for a different analysis of the impossibility of novel-writing in the aftermath of the Great Asian Tsunami, see Deckard, “‘Calligraphy of the Wave’: Disaster Representation and the Indian Ocean Tsunami”, in ‘Catastrophe and Environment’, ed. by Anthony Carrigan, *Moving Worlds: Journal of Transcultural Writings*, 14.2 (2015), pp. 25-45.

genesis and the accumulated nature of its formation (the ‘structure’ in David Arnold’s terminology). The writers of the Bengal famine seem to have this understanding in mind in their use of form and mode, which range from journalistic reportage, gothic horror, melodrama, satire, irony, and historical analyses, and through which the conjunctural nature of famine is presented. For example, Tarashankar Bandyopadhyay’s novel *Manwantar* (1944; *Epoch’s End*),¹¹³ which was primarily about the fear and panic that the Second World War and the Japanese bombings created in Calcutta and not directly about the famine, nonetheless refers to a number of concrete historical reasons for the disaster. The novel ends as the famine approaches the city with starvation, violence, and death. Bandyopadhyay uses various stylistic features and modal choices to register the social conditions: naturalistic imagery to capture the immediate horrible effects, melodrama to render pain, analytical accounts to explain longer factors responsible for the disaster, and episodic structure to suggest the impossibility of writing a linear narrative at a moment of huge social crisis. What is noteworthy is that a comparison between this novel and his earlier fiction, notably *Ganadevata* (*The Temple Pavilion*) or *Kalindi*,¹¹⁴ shows that the formal and modal issues in this novel have undergone significant shifts and improvisations but have not departed entirely from the conventions of realist writing. I argue that these shifts have taken place because the writer attempts to understand the nature of the disaster and responds to the question of how to *realistically* represent it.¹¹⁵

¹¹³ Tarashankar Bandyopadhyay, *Epoch’s End*, trans. by Hirendranath Mookherjee (Calcutta: Mitralaya, 1945).

¹¹⁴ Tarashankar Bandyopadhyay, ‘Kalindi’, in *Tarashankar Rachanabali Dwitiyo Khando* (Kolkata: Mitra and Ghosh, 1975), pp. 1-260; ‘Ganadevata’, in *Tarashankar Rachanabali Tritiyo Khando* (Kolkata: Mitra and Ghosh, 1986), pp. 103-370.

¹¹⁵ As I argued in the previous chapter, there is a vital link between the terms realistic and realist, but they are not interchangeable. The impetus to represent something realistically about a disaster often comes from the perception of the enormous horror that one witnesses. Realistic art offers the therapeutic possibility that these difficult moments of trauma and healing are a collective experience and act (that thousands of others are also suffering from the trauma arising from a tragedy and that we are not alone). There are a number of strategies and resources which are implemented to make a narrative realistic about hunger, some of which I discuss here through the works of Bhattacharya and Chakraborty. For a comparative analysis, see these novels: Hamsun’s *Hunger* (1890), O’Flaherty’s *Famine* (1937), Devi’s *Khsudha* (*Hunger*; Kolkata: Karuna, 1981), and Ollikainen’s *White Hunger* (2015). For the realistic in narrative, see George Levine, *The Realistic Imagination: English Fiction from Frankenstein to Lady Chatterley* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983); and Cora Diamond, *The Realistic Spirit: Wittgenstein, Philosophy, and the Mind* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991).

The question of disaster and realist representation has been raised by Anthony Carrigan in an essay, 'Towards a Postcolonial Disaster Studies'.¹¹⁶ Charting brief histories of disaster and postcolonial studies, Carrigan argues for a decolonised disaster studies where the epistemological and cultural practices of a catastrophe-based text, especially from the Global South, would be read politically through their links with the histories of colonialism, imperialism, and current forms of global capitalism. Reading Kamau Brathwaite's magnum opus, *MR* (Magical Realism) where Brathwaite asks us to understand 'the intimate relationship between power, exploitation, violence, and disaster' and 'a multivalent concept of "nature" as material and metaphysical entity',¹¹⁷ Carrigan argues that magical realism in Brathwaite's multiple, often elusive definitions becomes more of 'an *alternative epistemology* or *mode of understanding* than a conventional literary genre as such, which emerges in contradistinction to the catastrophic epistemologies embedded in western colonialism.'¹¹⁸ Brathwaite seems to grasp at the root of the debate here that a literary form is essentially a mode of consciousness, understanding, and expression. But Brathwaite's linking of magical realism with 'the literature [...] of optimistic catastrophe' and of social realism with 'the literature of negative catastrophe' appears problematic to me.¹¹⁹ For Brathwaite social realism betrays the linear, sequential narrative of colonialism and progress, and, subsequently, of catastrophe, and is unable to capture the counter-hegemonic narrative of the underprivileged and the subaltern. Magical realism, on the other hand, is experimental, layered, and radical in representing the historical continuities and discontinuities in the colony. I think this reading does not do justice to the formal heterogeneity within social realism, and, in not qualifying the use of the terms such as realism, social realism, critical realism, etc., it puts all these terms under a homogenising epistemology (threatening in the act the very thesis of epistemological and historical difference within the practices of magical realism constructed by Brathwaite).

Realism in the colony, as I discussed in the previous chapter, is used in an immensely critical fashion; it is highly political in energies and deeply self-conscious

¹¹⁶ Anthony Carrigan, 'Towards A Postcolonial Disaster Studies', in *Global Ecologies and the Environmental Humanities: Postcolonial Approaches*, ed. by Elizabeth DeLoughrey, Jill Didur, and Anthony Carrigan (London: Routledge, 2015), pp. 117-39.

¹¹⁷ Ibid, p. 125.

¹¹⁸ Ibid, pp. 126-27; emphasis in original.

¹¹⁹ Kamau Brathwaite, *MR*, 2 Vols. (New York: Savacou North, 2002), p. 347.

in the practices of combining Western and indigenous aesthetics. When the realist framework is used to render the event of a disaster, the form goes through further complication and improvisation. Mihir Bhattacharya's essay, 'Realism and the Syntax of Difference' (2004), gives us a useful lead here.¹²⁰ Bhattacharya considers the Lukácsian thesis on the individuation of the novel through world-historical 'types', but adds that to realise the 'historicity of aesthetic strategies' is to also recognise many other ways of constructing a realist text. The 'organic' sequential mode of narrative, a product of the bourgeois era, he argues in the same spirit as Meenakshi Mukherjee (1985), was imported and implemented in British India but 'it never swamped different fictional means of constructing a sequence'.¹²¹ He studies the famine narratives of Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay (*Ashani Sanket* or *The Ominous Sign*) and Manik Bandyopadhyay (*Chintamani*), written between 1944 and 1946, in order to show the range of techniques that these authors used *within* the form of realism. Whereas Bibhutibhushan's story, set in a village, is narrativised largely through what Bhattacharya calls the relation between 'motivation' and 'device' (the construction of famine narratives through allusions, fragmentary discussions, and sudden scenes of horror), Manik Bandyopadhyay by contrast practises an 'analytical' style of writing. Rather than locating 'narrative truth' in the 'epistemic' boundaries of the villagers (that the historical reasons of the famine as something impossible for the villagers to understand, which Bibhutibhushan suggests through a conspicuous absence of analytical discussions of the famine on the villagers' part, and through showing briefly in the end the disaster's devastating effects on these vulnerable and ignorant people, inviting pity and sympathy), Manik presents historical causality in the expression and arrangement of images, in diction and rhythm, and in the use of dialects, and attempts to situate the links between these and the larger historical conditions and forces such as imperialism and colonialism. Manik's realism violates the epistemic boundaries to present the 'unrepresentable', which, as a Marxist and social activist, he 'perceived to be a much needed form of cultural practice in the contemporary phase of the evolution of the indigenous form of Indian modernity'.¹²² Bhattacharya concludes that Manik's imagistic and syntactical improvisations and the analytical registers he uses to express

¹²⁰ Mihir Bhattacharya, 'Realism and the Syntax of Difference: Narratives of the Bengal Famine', in *The Making of Indian History: Essays Presented to Irfan Habib*, ed. by K. N. Panikkar, Terence Byres, and Utsa Patnaik (London: Anthem Press, 2004), pp. 478-500.

¹²¹ Ibid, p. 491.

¹²² Ibid, p. 480.

the deeper structural changes in society arise from his engaged understanding of world-historical forces and their effects on the contemporary colonised Indian society.¹²³ To this line of argument I would like to add that it is not only the world historical forces that realism registers through its various capacities, but also the trauma and suffering, the possibility of releasing the tragedy and the depth of pain created by the famine, what Margaret Kelleher in *The Feminization of Famine* calls literature's power of 'quasi-intuitiveness' to express the 'inexpressible'.¹²⁴ For socially committed writers writing about a famine from close distance, there is as much desire to analyse and demystify the oppressive forces responsible for the famine as to justify why such analysis and identification is important, and to express the inexpressible by writing a 'realistic', heartrending tale of tragedy and loss. As the famine turns into chronic malnutrition and slow violence in the ensuing years, writers appear to employ a new set of formal and modal features ranging from a long first-person narrative account/memoir by a peasant, an omniscient narration interspersed with free indirect discourse about an urban poor criminal, or a story-within-a-story structure, to construct a realistic narrative of suffering and crisis. These modal variations and formal changes, born of the famine and the severe crisis in food afterwards which turned the social space of postcolonial Bengal and India into a disaster environment, constitute what borrowing from Upamanyu Pablo Mukherjee can be called 'a disaster style of writing' in the postcolonial context.¹²⁵ I will now turn to the novels themselves and test out some of these arguments. The two novels I discuss at length are Bhabani Bhattacharya's *So Many Hungers!* (1947) and Amalendu Chakraborty's *Ākāler Sandhane* (1982), which is written approximately forty years later and revisits the famine. I will also provide a brief formal study of a novel by Kamala Markandaya to understand how economic scarcity and starvation in the post-independence era drive writers to dominantly take a social realist form which is different from the disaster-based realist style.

¹²³ Ibid, p. 499.

¹²⁴ Margaret Kelleher, *Feminization*, pp. 3-4.

¹²⁵ Mukherjee, *Victorian*, p. 24.

Bhabani Bhattacharya's *So Many Hungers!*: The Disastrous Decade and the Analytical-Affective Mode

Bhabani Bhattacharya (1906-1988) began his literary career in the 1940s. Born in an affluent Bengali family and educated in London, Bhattacharya had a promising professional career. During his study at the University of London, he was influenced by Marxism (Harold Laski's theory of 'crisis in democracy') and participated in the *League Against Imperialism*, writing eventually a Ph.D. thesis on the socio-political agitations in Bengal in the nineteenth century.¹²⁶ These interests turned him towards the questions of violence and injustice in contemporary India perpetrated by the systems of colonialism and imperialism. During his Ph.D., as his literary biographer Dorothy B. Shimer tells us, he avidly read contemporary literary works and was highly moved by such writers as Knut Hamsun, Romain Rolland, John Steinbeck, and John Dos Passos.¹²⁷ He came back to Bengal in 1934 and started working as a journalist, meanwhile also translating into English some of the poems by Rabindranath Tagore. With suggestions from Tagore, he started writing a novel in English (to be published later as *Music for Mohini*), but could not proceed as the Bengal famine 'compelled' him to write and publish *So Many Hungers!* (1947).¹²⁸ It was then followed by another novel based on the same event, namely *He Who Rides a Tiger* (1954).¹²⁹ Critics have found the latter more intriguing in style. Born of and exhibiting a sense of urgency, *So Many Hungers!* has been criticised as weak in structure, fragmentary and uneven in style.¹³⁰ However, I argue that these criticisms do not take the stylistic issues carefully enough. A disaster is the moment of collapse of all social and ideological structures into fragments. It is also the moment when, as Upamanyu Pablo Mukherjee (2010) writes, the underlying structures that push the system towards this collapse are exposed (noted specifically when the structures are reconfigured cognitively and aesthetically).¹³¹ In order to capture this dialectic of fragmentation of the total system

¹²⁶ See Dorothy B. Shimer, *Bhabani Bhattacharya* (Boston: Twayne, 1975), pp. 12.

¹²⁷ For a list of writers by whom he was influenced by or with whom he had contact, see Shimer, *Bhabani*, pp. 8-10; also see his interview in *Mahfil*, p. 44.

¹²⁸ Bhabani Bhattacharya, *So Many Hungers!* (Bombay: Jaico Publishing, 1964).

¹²⁹ Bhabani Bhattacharya, *He Who Rides a Tiger* (London: Angus and Robertson, 1960).

¹³⁰ See Varughese quoted in Chandrasekharan, p. 56; M. K. Naik, *A History of Indian English Literature* (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1999), pp. 213-14; Priyamvada Gopal, *The Indian English Novel: Nation, History, and Narration* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 61.

¹³¹ Upamanyu Pablo Mukherjee, *Postcolonial Environments: Nature, Culture and the Contemporary Indian Novel in English* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2010), p. 144.

and the perception of totality, it becomes necessary for a socially committed writer to follow a style of writing that is different from a conventionally written novel. At the same time, a disaster writer has to also negotiate the trauma and suffering caused by the disaster by writing a realistic account of the production and effects of the crisis and the possibility of overcoming them. Bhattacharya learnt of this humanist model of literary realism from the Progressive Writers' Association, which espoused the need to write literature about the downtrodden and the oppressed in colonised societies, to show empathy for as well as critical solidarity with them, and to bring into the open and to criticise the dominant structures responsible for their cause. He admired Premchand's understanding of literature as 'holding a mirror' to society and his realism's complex representational capacity.¹³² But he also knew that the mirrored representation of society had deficiencies when the society in context was going through a huge moment of immediate crisis produced by a catastrophe: the War, the sudden emergence of skeletal people in public spaces asking for rice-water, the avoidable deaths of humans and nonhumans on the streets, the rackets of black-marketing, the rise of prostitution as a profit-making business, and the unbridled amassing of wealth by the middle and upper classes. The realisms of Premchand and Steinbeck had to be improvised to adequately represent the immediate and wide ruptures in society, the historically specific nature of the event. They had to be combined with rigorous causal analysis of the historical forces, and with deep emotional and emphatic use of language and tone in order to make literature therapeutic. It is from this rooted historical perspective and social commitment that Bhattacharya composes his fractured art and his analytical-affective mode.

So Many Hungers! is temporally marked from the beginning and shuttles between the city of Calcutta and a village called Baruni. It begins on the inauspicious day of the Second World War when Rahoul, a Cambridge-returned scientist now working at the University of Calcutta, listens to the All India Radio and wonders about India's fate in this Great Battle: 'But could a people step out into a war said to be waged for democratic freedom, so long as that freedom was denied them? India in bondage asked to fight for world freedom!'¹³³ This thought reminds us of Nehru's

¹³² See Premchand, *Sahitya ka Uddeshya [The Purpose of Literature]* (Allahabad: Hans Prakashan, Caxton, 1967), pp. 100-38. Also consult Ulka Anjaria for a compelling analysis of the word 'mirror' in Lukács, Premchand, and literary realism; Anjaria, *Realism*, pp. 8-12.

¹³³ Bhattacharya, *Hungers*, p. 9.

concern that India should not support the British and participate in the war of freedom when it was itself unfree.¹³⁴ Thoughts of this kind would increasingly lead Rahoul to the nationalist cause. His younger brother Kunal decides to join the British army and prove himself, while his father Samarendra Basu, who works as a barrister, is interested in the profits to be made from the War. For him, war is a huge business, ‘a storm in the share market’.¹³⁵ These thoughts are contrasted with the nationalist concerns and activism of Devata, an old man worshipped as God (Devata meaning God), in the village of Baruni. Devata turns out to be Rahoul’s grandfather who sacrificed family and material wealth for the Gandhian cause of non-violent anti-colonial resistance. He is supported by the peasants in the village, represented by Kajoli’s family – Kajoli and her mother will have to bear the brunt of the famine and emigrate to Calcutta as her father and brother are arrested for the Quit India connections. Modelled on Gandhi, Devata takes care of the villagers’ welfare, teaches the peasants moral integrity and speculates on such matters as the destruction of the rural economy through the scorched earth policy and others. In these two characters, Bhattacharya forges a combination of Nehru and Gandhi during the Second World War and the nationalist movements and situates his critical commentary.

Hungers follows an expert/academic style of analysis.¹³⁶ Rahoul and Devata are representative characters through whom the historical context of the famine is situated. As Rahoul comes to meet his grandfather and they discuss nationalist struggle and redistribution of land, Devata briefly refers to the history of the Permanent Settlement: ‘And he spoke of the background of Bengal’s rural life – of how long ago, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, a servant of the British Trading Company made a “permanent settlement” with the landlords of Bengal, fixing for all time their annual payment to the Treasury’.¹³⁷ Devata is aware of the colonial history and can see through the changes in current agrarian policy or the post-war crisis in land revenues and agriculture. This passage suggests Bhattacharya’s academic knowledge

¹³⁴ For a reading on the late-colonial political context, especially from the perspectives and practices of the Indian Congress, Gandhi, and Nehru, see Barbara D. Metcalf and Thomas R. Metcalf, *A Concise History of Modern India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 200-214 (p. 207).

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

¹³⁶ For a reading of how the novel, owing to Bhattacharya’s expertise in academic and journalistic writings, draws its analytical style of discourse-making in the historical and social sciences, see my essay, ‘Colonial Governance, Disaster, and the Social in Bhabani Bhattacharya’s Novels of the 1943 Bengal Famine’, *ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature*, 47.4 (2016), pp. 45-70.

¹³⁷ Bhattacharya, *Hungers*, p. 19.

in the socio-political and economic history of Bengal. Devata here refers to terms like value of land, agreement between landlord and cultivator, hierarchy of overlords, cash crop, and profit: ‘The peasantry was not in their eyes a living mass; it was like a tract of coalfield out of which you hewed coal for profit and more profit, heedless of its exhaustion’.¹³⁸ These terms are not only technical in character and require knowledge in political economy, they also underline a Marxist analysis at work here. Marx wrote in *Capital I* that human labour under the capitalist system turns into a commodity and human endeavour into a mechanical thing – a process which the Caribbean intellectual, Aimé Césaire called a ‘thing-ification of life’.¹³⁹ Bhattacharya, suggests that colonialism and capitalism are deeply connected, and in order to resist this system of abstraction and commodification and to regain human agency, the anti-colonial campaigns must begin with the peasantry, with boycotting Western products and using native resources (reminding us of Gandhi’s call for civil disobedience and for the peasantry to unite in the struggle).¹⁴⁰ He then sarcastically defines this incidental aspect of reification as the system of life under imperialism. As Samarendra suffers nightmares over the crashing of the Stock Exchange in Calcutta, Bhattacharya’s narrator says, ‘The fate of India would anyhow be decided at a conference table, and the Crown’s brightest possession would change hands with the ease of a cheque passing from account to account’.¹⁴¹ A country is not its people and social ecosystem, but a piece of paper whose fate is decided at conference tables. The reference to ‘the Crown’s brightest possession’ points to both Britain’s imperialist history in India¹⁴² and Bhattacharya’s critique of how in imperialism countries are seen as resources for material wealth, possessions of imperialist powers, and looted, plundered, and passed on to others for further exploitation.

¹³⁸ Ibid, p. 19.

¹³⁹ Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy Vol I*, trans. by Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1970), p. 27; Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*, trans. by Joan Pinkham (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1972), p. 6.

¹⁴⁰ For a compelling study on Gandhi’s call to peasantry, see Judith Brown, ‘Gandhi and Indian Peasants, 1917-1922’, *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 1.4 (1974), 462-85; it should be noted here that Bhattacharya was highly influenced by Gandhian non-violent anti-colonialism, and wrote a couple of books on Gandhi himself. See Bhattacharya, *Gandhi, the Writer: The Image as it Grew* (Delhi: National Books Trust, India, 1969); and *Mahatma Gandhi* (New Delhi: Arnold Heinemann, 1977).

¹⁴¹ Bhattacharya, *Hungers*, p. 29.

¹⁴² See *The Asiatic Annual Register*, 1804, p. 31; for a historical study, see Nancy F. Koehn, *The Power of Commerce. Economy and Governance in the First British Empire* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994).

The most current form of resource-related exploitation, Bhattacharya suggests, is the speculative mode of capitalism where resources and profit-making are based not on the availability of materials (food grains) but on the *possibility*, i.e. the speculations and predictions, of such availability. Samarendra who invested all his money, his wife's jewellery, and everything he had during the War suffers a huge defeat as Britain is defeated momentarily: 'His large profits had been wiped clean as though they were a mere figure on the plate'; but in just a few days' time, as the British army begins to win crucial battles, his luck is restored and his riches come back doubled in profit.¹⁴³ Bhattacharya indicates that this mode of capitalism was predominant during period and might be an important reason for the famine. Bhattacharya's indication is not altogether baseless. The speculative mode of capitalism was instituted in Calcutta during the Second World War. Historian Ritu Birla in *Stages of Capital* (2009) traces the gradual conversion of gambling and speculations into laws governing market economy in late nineteenth-century Britain and India. These 'fictions of law', as she calls them, 'conjured new vehicles and instruments for trade, finance and charity, orchestrating new incarnations of capital as they enforced the distinction between the market and bazaar'.¹⁴⁴ However, these new forms of 'time' and 'bargaining' were difficult to integrate into the kinship-based and colonised form of market in India, and they were accompanied by the forces of nationalism and critique of a free market economy. But by the 1920s, Birla notes, debates around the 'market profitability and nonmercantile public engagement in speculative capital' took place in Britain and India, bolstered by systematic curricular studies on commerce and market in Presidency College, Calcutta, which linked civil society with the emerging commerce economy and institutionalised the market as the 'lived supralocal abstraction', a part of everyday private and public life.¹⁴⁵ Urban businessmen likely had a knowledge of speculative economy by the time the war broke out and tasted the first fruits of profit-making through hoarding and speculation during the war. In *So Many Hungers!*, Samarendra, elated with the outbreak of the War, asks Rahoul, '[s]teel will rise steeply, so will gold—which to choose?'¹⁴⁶ He knows that war is 'the most enriching

¹⁴³ Bhattacharya, *Hungers*, pp. 34-35.

¹⁴⁴ Ritu Birla, *Stages of Capital: Law, Culture, and Market Governance in Late Colonial India* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), p. 143.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid, p. 151.

¹⁴⁶ Bhattacharya, *Hungers*, p. 6.

industry',¹⁴⁷ 'a God-sent opportunity',¹⁴⁸ and that the shares market will be booming with speculation on demand and supply. For him, one needs to liquidate everything and invest it in the right speculative venture. In an innovative prose style reminiscent of John Steinbeck, Bhattacharya records the onrush of people buying and selling war material:

Gold rush in Clive Street. A motley crowd surging by the Stock Exchange [...] Pulses pounding. The blood beating in the ears. The crowd with cash in the banks, cash to play with [...] Buy munitions of war – things that make guns, shells [...] No rubber shares in the market? A telegram to Singapore does the trick. Send fast telegrams to Singapore. Shape up Singapore [...] What have you to buy with? Open your pass-books. Empty your accounts. Take a loan from friends. Mortgage your house. Sell, sell your gold, the gold on the body of your wife.¹⁴⁹

This is a remarkable picture of the rise of wartime stock markets: the sheer madness of the profit economy, the pounding pulses, the rash speculations, and the liquidation of material property. Note the passage's staccato rhythm that imitates the speed of the key element of the share market – information. The passage directs our attention to how the stock economy creates its own market, especially in the example of rubber shares where the unnecessary material can be sold on the basis of rumours or communications, reminding of Karl Polanyi's notion of the self-regulating nature of capital and its production of fictitious commodities (how capital makes land, labour, and money into fictions and how these fictions shape human need).¹⁵⁰ Bhattacharya's innovative, modernist prose manages to convey the hurried actions of the city's middle class for hoarding and black marketing materials that will be needed for war. Samarendra's investments into an unknown future is, thus, a structural part of colonial (finance) capitalism. As the money comes back doubled, Samarendra decides to open a rice hoarding company, Cheap Rice Ltd. From his remarks above on the hike in price

¹⁴⁷ Ibid, p. 17.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid, p. 31.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid, pp. 15-16.

¹⁵⁰ Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time* (Boston: Beacon, 2001). Polanyi writes: '[L]abour is only another name for human activity which goes with life itself, which in its turn is not produced for sale but for entirely different reasons, nor can that activity be detached from the rest of life, be stored or mobilized; land is only another name for nature, which is not produced by man; actual money, finally, is merely a token of purchasing power which, as a rule, is not produced at all, but comes into being through the mechanism of banking or state finance. None of them is produced for sale. The commodity description of labour, land, and money is entirely fictitious' (p. 72).

in specific materials, it seems that he knows (possibly from his experience during the First World War) that during war, the (colonial) government is in need of a lot of rice to feed the vast number of British Indian soldiers. So, all the essential commodities – rice, sugar, oil, and steel – will be in demand. He is so much persuaded by his conjectures that he decides to give up on his barrister career and invest all his energies in building a hoarding business. Bhattacharya indicates that it was difficult to resist such an attractive form of capitalism. As the narrator discloses, ‘Samarendra had no other thought that spring and summer save rice: no other interest, no other dream. He and his colleagues worked feverishly building up the business’.¹⁵¹

This mode of capitalism did not remain enclosed only in the city but reached the countryside as well through the ‘trader class’ which, as Birla notes, bridged the gap between the rural and the urban.¹⁵² In this novel, Girish, the local trader, is that bridge. Girish’s grocery store is a ‘link between the peasant and the market-place’ in the event that people miss the Saturday haat (the rural bazaar).¹⁵³ His dream of selling stocks in the remote urban market remains unrealised until he receives a profitable contract from a district agent who informs him about a pyramid scheme from which he can earn commissions from stocking the villagers’ rice.¹⁵⁴ He proceeds to plant fear in the villagers about an imminent Japanese invasion and the horrible prospects of looting, raping, and vanquishing the population.¹⁵⁵ Bhattacharya shows how Girish and his men spread posters, handouts, and leaflets disseminating the notion of ‘evil looking’ Japanese coming to violate the honour of the land and ‘Bengal’s beautiful women’, and how in the acts the colonial racist stereotypes (here about the Japanese peril) appear internalised and methodically used by the colonial comprador classes of the money-lenders and commodity traders to exploit the peasantry.¹⁵⁶ Girish largely succeeds in his plan as many people yield their produce to Cheap Rice Ltd.¹⁵⁷ Together with the scorched earth (or the boat denial) policy enacted by the colonial government,¹⁵⁸ these activities, Bhattacharya indicates, debilitate the rural economy and compel the villagers to emigrate to the city for food and shelter, giving rise to a

¹⁵¹ Bhattacharya, *Hungers*, p. 39.

¹⁵² Birla, *Stages*, p. 145.

¹⁵³ Bhattacharya, *Hungers*, p. 58.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid*, p. 62.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid*, pp. 81-84.

¹⁵⁶ Bhattacharya, *Hungers*, p. 62, p. 141.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid*, pp. 102-06.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid*, p. 51.

destitute class and intensifying the horrible conditions of living by the urban poor. The narrator states ‘Presently the rice-hunger that was a thin stream was swelling into a mighty flood. Fisherfolk needed rice. Craftsman needed rice. And all this while uprooted people were passing through the village, victims of the Army order of evacuation’.¹⁵⁹ Such emphasis on the forcible extraction of rice, the inept colonial administration, and the repercussions of the Second World War also appear later in the works of Bhatia, Jean Drèze, and Sen. Although Sen is right in saying that ‘the famine was largely a rural phenomenon’,¹⁶⁰ he discounts the importance of the portrayal of racial fear for the Japanese created by the War. In addition to providing this insight, Bhattacharya suggests that there could have been a possible link between the national liberation movement and the arrest of thousands of male peasants, which might have weakened the workforce needed to harvest good produce. Girish and other traders persuade the villagers to destroy the local post offices in response to the British soldiers’ desecration of the Gandhian flag. After this act, when the male peasants are beaten by the police and taken to jail, Girish and the traders force the rest of the villagers to yield their rice to the government, both as an act of recompense and of patriotic appeal.¹⁶¹ This episode suggests how the conditions of the famine were accelerated by the self-serving needs of the traders and middlemen like Girish: the trader class fabricated a situation of riot in order to exclude male peasants from the harvest and to seize the villagers’ crops coercively. Both Bhattacharya and Amartya Sen indicate that inflation was systemically created by a section of traders and bourgeois within the upper class to support the fiction of wartime demands.¹⁶² The programmatic end of capitalism at first extended the gap between the rural and the urban economies, then shattered an already deplorable rural economy ridden with debts and feudal imbalances, expediting the peasants’ long march to the city. This process evokes Karl Marx’s famous note in *Capital I*: ‘Capital grows in one place to a huge mass in a single hand, because it has in another place been lost by many’.¹⁶³ Capital flows with this uneven development, and, as Neil Smith explains, it is most uneven where capital is most mobile.¹⁶⁴ The destitute immigrants in the city of

¹⁵⁹ Ibid, p. 105.

¹⁶⁰ Sen, *Poverty*, p. 63.

¹⁶¹ Ibid, p. 102.

¹⁶² Sen, *Poverty*, p. 56.

¹⁶³ Karl Marx, *Capital I*, p. 441.

¹⁶⁴ Neil Smith, *Uneven Development: Nature, Capital, and the Production of Space* (London: Verso, 2010), p. 199.

Calcutta present a picture in which development and deprivation go together, producing what Smith terms the ‘seesaw of capital’.¹⁶⁵ Bhattacharya represents how this unevenness is manufactured artificially. He offers insights, long before the noted critical studies on the Bengal famine, on the possible interconnections between capital, governance, geography, and disaster.

Such rigorous analytical engagement is not always widely found in famine novels. In Liam O’Flaherty’s *Famine* (1937), where he holds the colonial British government and the Irish Repeal Association responsible for manufacturing the Irish 1845-1846 famine, this kind of sustained political-economic reading is lacking.¹⁶⁶ *Famine* is of course an analytical novel, probably the best kind of analytical writing that realism can offer. But analysis in Bhattacharya is too frequently deployed (sometimes even the unlearned peasants, such as Kajoli’s father, appear to analyse complex sociological conditions) which shapes his nature of writing. One of the reasons for this overwhelming use of analysis may be that Bhattacharya is writing too close to the event. He worked as a journalist during the period and witnessed the tragedy firsthand. His expertise in journalism and in academic writing (for his Ph.D. in contemporary Indian history) supplies him with the rigour and enthusiasm for academic analysis and with the impetus to explore connections between economic, political, and social forces, sometimes all at once. O’Flaherty, writing almost a century later from the famine, appears to have the benefit of hindsight on the historical reasons, and uses a narrator who knows the conditions well. In fact, like in a realist novel proper, his narrator anticipates the conditions and foretells the tragedy which seems impossible for the poor and the vulnerable to see: ‘For the very poor are unable to see far into the future. If they can make provision for their immediate wants, they are not greatly troubled by a remote disaster, whose shadow is only beginning to assume shape on the horizon’.¹⁶⁷ Bhattacharya’s narrator is full of force and energy compared to this calm and slow narration. Irony, as one of the fundamental devices for realist narration, is conspicuously missing or deliberately unused in Bhattacharya’s novel. In place of irony, what marks Bhattacharya’s presentist writing is the impulse for documentation of the famine violence which is almost ethnographic in nature. In no other novels of

¹⁶⁵ Ibid, p. 197.

¹⁶⁶ Liam O’Flaherty, *Famine* (Dublin: Wolfhound, 2002); an exemplary passage is the discussions between Father Roche and Gleeson in chapter XVI.

¹⁶⁷ O’Flaherty, *Famine*, p. 56.

this famine do we find such vivid and graphic descriptions of famine violence.¹⁶⁸ Consider a few images. At an early stage of the famine in the village Baruni, a woman is shown to dig up a trench and bury a child alive. As Kajoli's mother intervenes, she cries and says, "Poor godling, so hurt with hunger! Look, my breasts have no milk" – lifting the tatters that half covered her bosom – "he has no throat to cry. If he sleeps a little! Where is sleep? He's hurt all the time with hunger. In his cool earth bed he can close his eyes, sleep."¹⁶⁹ She tries to bury the child because living with a baby under such physical oppression while her fisherman husband is jailed for participation in the national liberation movement is impossible. In another episode, when the villagers decide to emigrate to Calcutta, Kajoli comes across the scene where 'a woman lay stretched by the tree-trunk, groaning while a jackal crouched and ate her body'.¹⁷⁰ In the city, the images are even more horrible: the destitute fighting with each other over food from garbage cans, spreading of various diseases (dysentery the most common among them), bodies going unwashed, people struggling over a bowl of gruel, and famished pot-bellied skeletal people traversing the city like ghosts.¹⁷¹ Set one after another and appearing like snapshots, these images remind us of the juxtaposition technique in John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*¹⁷² or the strategy of 'recognition' in Bijan Bhattacharya's famine play *Nabanna (New Harvest; 1944)*.¹⁷³ These writers used these techniques to state the contradictory pictures of wealth and poverty, the class-based nature of the disaster, and to push the urban middle-class readers to confront their criminal acts of silence and complacency. Bhattacharya's rendering is also directed at these aspects. He borrows these images from the widely circulating newspapers.¹⁷⁴ These popular images made it easier for him to connect to

¹⁶⁸ In Bibhutibhushan's *Ashani Sanket*, the famine is about to take place, while in Manik's *Chintamani*, the famine is mostly in the background. See Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay, *Ashani Sanket* (Kolkata: Mitra and Ghosh, 2012); Manik Bandyopadhyay, 'Chintamani', in *Manik Bandyopadhyay Rachonasamagra*, ed. by Alok Ray et al. (Kolkata: Paschimbanga Bangla Akademi, 2007), pp. 239-86.

¹⁶⁹ Bhattacharya, *Hungers*, p. 126.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid, p. 145.

¹⁷¹ Ibid, p. 164-78.

¹⁷² See the narrative technique of elongation and escalation in chapters 7 and 8 of the novel, *The Grapes of Wrath* (London: Penguin, 2000).

¹⁷³ The theatre critic Nandi Bhatia tells us that Bijon Bhattacharya represents the stark differences in urban socio-economic conditions during the famine by juxtaposing two contradictory socio-economic pictures (wealth and poverty) on stage, and, with control over light, asking us to recognise the historical and contemporary nature of class dominance. She calls it a 'recognition' technique. Bhatia, *Acts of Authority, Acts of Resistance: Theatre and Politics in Colonial and Post-colonial India* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2004), p. 87.

¹⁷⁴ As a journalist, Bhattacharya was well aware of the coverage of famine violence in such newspapers as *The Statesman*, *The Hindusthan Standard*, *The Associated Press*, etc. (many of which appeared in

the urban public and express his anger, while the deep melodramatic tone of writing helped him exploit the pathos of the situation. This is missing from O’Flaherty’s¹⁷⁵ and others’ work. This ethnographic impulse may also have its roots in Bhattacharya’s troubles as a writer (as he turned from being an historian and journalist into a fiction writer), namely, his anxieties regarding how to understand and represent the logic and immensity of the tragedy. The image of a jackal eating a human alive is the blurring of all values that constitute society, the conditions of co-habiting between humans and non-humans. In a famine-stricken world, life is exposed to death from all quarters. In listing these horrific images, Bhattacharya, thus, shows what he considers a novelist must have – ‘keen observation’ skills and deep sympathy for the situation.¹⁷⁶ A novelist born in times of a huge social crisis cannot avoid the everyday scenes of horror neither can he or she avoid the documentation of such horror for raising sympathy and awareness. Observation, criticism, and sympathy thus become integral elements of disaster writing. Through his analytical-journalistic mode of writing, he makes the novel a genre of socially urgent ethnographic documentation. The novel’s documentary nature recalls, in particular, Émile Zola’s descriptions of the horrifying working and living conditions and scenes of social violence in the Montsou coal mine in his novel *Germinal*, as it also brings to mind Zola’s naturalist concept of the novel as ‘scientific’ report with segments of society in the novel’s petri-dish.¹⁷⁷

But novel writing in a time of disaster is not only about analysis and description. It is also about ethical issues, humanistic concerns, and, above all, reflection on the modes of representation. Reporting receives a new meaning in this novel through discussions on art, language, and representation. When the famine

the popular critical anthologies by social scientists such as Tarak Chandra Das, Kali Charan Ghosh, and others). For a note on this, see Kali Charan Ghosh, *Famines*, pp. 85-95.

¹⁷⁵ Compare the more restrained and embodied representation of violence in O’Flaherty: ‘In her [Sally’s] eyes was that dreadful famine look; the scared stare of an animal’ (p. 326); or as Thomsy describes the herd of migrating, disease-stricken, starved people, ‘I got tidings of a body of men and I met several bodies of men, but they were all bodies of men wandering with hunger and not men on their keeping at all’ (p. 368).

¹⁷⁶ In his interview with Sudhakar Joshi, Bhattacharya stated, ‘I hold that a novel must have a social purpose. It must place before the reader something from a society’s point of view. Art is not necessarily for art’s sake. Purposeless art and literature which is much in vogue does not appear to me a sound judgement’. Qtd. in K. R. Chandrasekharan, *Bhabani Bhattacharya*, p. 3.

¹⁷⁷ For the metaphor that sees the novelist as a doctor anatomising a body and the novel as a decision-making tool, see Émile Zola, ‘The Experimental Novel’, in *The Experimental Novel and Other Essays*, trans. by Belle M. Sherman (New York: Haskell House, 1964), pp. 1-56; for the descriptions in *Germinal*, see specifically the passages (part three, chapters four and five) on the coalminer’s strike in the novel. Zola, *Germinal*, 1885, trans. by Roger Pearson (London: Penguin, 2004), pp. 175-97.

breaks out in the city and corpses are everywhere on the street, Rahoul finds in a busy railway station an artist drawing the sketch of a child suckling off a dead mother. The scene invites commuters who gradually turn into an agitated mob accusing the artist of his neglected duties. After being asked by the station master why has he not 'reported' the incident to them, the artist replies 'What am I doing but trying to make a report? Not to the railway people. I have to report to India'.¹⁷⁸ Reminding us of famine artists like Chittoprasad, Somnath Hore, Zainul Abedin, who sketched the horrors of the famine and published them in national dailies to critique the unscrupulous and incomprehensibly callous British response to the event,¹⁷⁹ the scene also hints at a related question such acts may incur in society, namely, the accusation against the artist for being a negligent, profit-seeking, insensitive human being. Quite expectedly, the mob starts lynching him. Bhattacharya writes, 'He was a pathetic sight, buttons ripped from his tunic, undervest revealed, but there was fire in his eyes'.¹⁸⁰ As Rahul collects and hands over his pencil and sketching pad to him, thrown in the rail-track, the enraged artist first asserts the importance of the act to Rahoul and then speaks in a voice 'heavy with emotion': 'I can't bear the sight [of the mother's corpse]. Sickening. You think I'm a brute?'¹⁸¹ There is a dual meaning of report here – of professional duty and of ethical concern. Would the report to a station-master be enough in this mammoth outbreak of violence? The reporter's duty is not only to identify and write/post about this single incident of tragedy, but to render the underlying structures that compel these situations, to inform the wider public of the catastrophic nature of the situation, and to make them feel guilty for their negligence and compel them to take steps about the situation. At the same time, reporting is also a question of the ethical value of producing art. Could an artist stay away from the sensibilities and emotions of humans while manufacturing art in a time of greater historical crisis? The narrator captures in the artist's sickening feelings a subjective attachment to the event: 'Rahoul stared at him. The artist had lost his detachment, and, with detachment, vision. He seethed with human feeling'.¹⁸² Clearly, it is a complex task to produce art in a time of catastrophe. There is a further complexity added to this

¹⁷⁸ Bhattacharya, *Hungers*, p. 162.

¹⁷⁹ For a reading on this, see Nikhil Sarkar, *A Matter of Conscience: Artists Bear Witness to the Great Bengal Famine of 1943* (Calcutta: Punascha, 1998).

¹⁸⁰ Bhattacharya, *Hungers*, p. 163.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 164.

¹⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 164.

in the next statement: ‘Rahoul heaved an unhappy sigh. It seemed to him as though the dead mother on the platform nursing her tiny one now died for the second time’.¹⁸³ The narrator seems to suggest that with subjective and emotional attachment, artistic representation of a catastrophic crisis becomes hindered or distorted. This act of self-reflexivity brings us back to the fundamental dilemma in catastrophe-based art: how does one tackle the material issues of an immediate horrible tragedy and reflect upon the tragedy at the same time? This is a problem that, as we noted, Bijan Bhattacharya among others was also going through before writing the play, *Nabanna*. This is not a question that only the narrator had thrown at us; Bhattacharya himself faced similar dilemmas and difficulties when he made the turn to become a writer from a different profession. He believed that ‘a novel must have a social purpose’ which the author achieves through the ‘right use’ of the elements of language and emotions.¹⁸⁴ The right use is the good balance between objective and subjective elements. Art born of a great historical crisis cannot be entirely objective. It needs to pay attention to people’s pain, trauma, and suffering, and allow for a therapeutic purpose. The novel responds to the subjective element through a localisation of emotion.

Hungers creates the world of affect through its variations of language: there are certain words which are idiosyncratic Bangla expressions for care and empathy, and passages which quintessentially stand for humanistic concerns.¹⁸⁵ On a number of occasions, the novel uses the word ‘a-ha-reh’ by Kajoli’s mother for an orphan whom she feeds.¹⁸⁶ This expression in colloquial Bangla stands for motherly empathy and love for the other, and implies knowledge in another human’s suffering and a possible resolution through human warmth, intimacy, and affection. Also, ‘Ma! Ma-go-ma!’¹⁸⁷ uttered by the famine victims everywhere in the streets for a sip of rice-water, expresses the pathos and trivialisation of the crisis. The word ‘Ma’ in Bangla stands

¹⁸³ Ibid, p. 164.

¹⁸⁴ As he writes in an essay, ‘Literature and Social Reality’ (first published in the journal, *The Aryan Path* in 1955), art is about reflecting upon crises in society and projecting possible courses of action: ‘Art must teach, but unobtrusively, by its vivid interpretation of life. Art must preach, but only by virtue of its being a vehicle of truth. If that is propaganda, there is no need to eschew that word’. See Bhabani Bhattacharya, ‘Literature and Social Reality’, in *Perspectives on Bhabani Bhattacharya*, ed. by Ramesh K. Srivastava (Ghaziabad: Vimal Prakashan, 1982), pp. 1-6 (p. 4).

¹⁸⁵ For reasons of space here I cannot do justice to the huge issue of language politics, which is a fundamental dilemma for post-independence writers of English, and is deeply intertwined with issues of catastrophe, crisis, and late-colonial Indian history. The issue will be tackled, however, when the chapter is revised and restructured for my planned monograph.

¹⁸⁶ Bhattacharya, *Hungers*, p. 84.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid, p. 173.

for mother. The wailing for rice contains an expectation of extending motherly love to the orphan-like victims. These expressions compel Bhattacharya to use a second-person narrative in a manner that is both affective and censorious: ‘You heard it day in, day out, every hour, every minute [...] You hated the hideous monotony of the wail. You hardened yourself against the wail. The destitutes became a race apart, insensitive, subhuman’.¹⁸⁸ There is as much empathy as there is criticism of society in these lines. The second-person narrative becomes appropriate to point a finger at the irresponsible and ‘insensitive’ middle-class society (there is a chiasmic turn in that retort and it includes the middle-class writer, Bhattacharya himself). At the same time, it conjures up a greater need for humanism and love for the other in a time of social and moral crisis. In an episode where Kajoli’s brother Onu is seen fighting with a ‘mangy’ dog for food, Onu wins the battle and then shares the food with it.¹⁸⁹ The love for the other that is hinted at in those idiomatic expressions is enlarged and transformed into an ethics of living during the time of disaster. Despite showing Onu’s selfishness, Bhattacharya restores the animalistic need for food through the principle of love for the other, suggesting in the act the contemporary Gandhian meaning of sacrifice for the nation.¹⁹⁰ These techniques allow him to build a humanistic realism – a realism that represents the crisis of the society only to be dialectically resolved in a socialist world. As Bhattacharya stated in an interview about the use of local words, ‘I have used such words as a technical device to heighten the sense of reality or, in some instances, to deepen characterization or simply to add a certain flavor’.¹⁹¹ Bhattacharya knew that it would be difficult to bring to the terrain of English the specific linguistic idiosyncrasies and emotional expressions required here.¹⁹² But he

¹⁸⁸ Ibid, p. 173; compare this episode with a similar one in Bijan Bhattacharya’s play, *Nabanna*, where Kunja is bitten by a dog while fighting against it for food at a garbage, and his wife Radhika, who is also scavenging, runs to him and bandages his wounds, while hurling abuse at the dog and feeling pity for both of them. This scene occurs outside of an upper-class wedding venue, where people are wasting food and discussing black market profits from the famine. See Bijan Bhattacharya, *Nabanna* (Kolkata: Dey’s, 2004), p. 77.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid, p. 178.

¹⁹⁰ Bhattacharya believed in a purposeful art that has a Gandhian socialist objective. See particularly his book, *Gandhi, the Writer*.

¹⁹¹ ‘I have not done that to educate my foreign readers. A creative writer does not try to educate. I have used such words as a technical device to heighten the sense of reality or, in some instances, to deepen characterization or simply to add a certain flavor. Apart from using Bengali or Hindi words in the original, I have sometimes used their literal English translation, even if it is contrary to English usage or idiom’ (p. 301). See Bhabani Bhattacharya, ‘An Interview with Bhabani Bhattacharya’, intr. by Janet P. Gemmill, *World Literature Written in English*, 14.2 (1975), pp. 300-09.

¹⁹² In the interview in *Mahfil*, he states, ‘The novelist writing in English has to tackle the problem of dialogue. That is perhaps the most difficult of all. He has to keep the “Indianness” of speech while writing correct English. Even to render in English a certain thought-idiom common to the Indian mind

also knew through his commitment to Marxism and to the social dimensions of literature that it is only through a proper understanding and exploitation of the historically specific conjuncture of the local that a dialectic between the local and the global can be meaningfully built. If disaster inspires writers to produce analyses and expositions of global systems of oppression, it also requires a release of pain through the sympathetic and humane reporting of the local aspects of the tragedy.¹⁹³

Finally, Bhattacharya's use of gender and political leadership requires attention for our discussion. Margaret Kelleher has covered the issue of rape and gendered exploitation during the famine in her book *The Feminization of Famine* (1997).¹⁹⁴ To this study I add Bhattacharya's thoughts on the bourgeois moral crisis – the tensions between expectations and reality in anti-colonial nationalism. During Kajoli's march to the city, she was rescued from being eaten by a jackal by an Indian soldier fighting the War. He gives her food and picks her up, looking for her family. Suddenly he feels the impulse to have sex with Kajoli's half-naked body. Bhattacharya's narrator says:

The soldier was a man of feeling. But he desperately needed a woman. It was a year since he had seen his wife. And in this instant he was back home with his wife. He could barely see Kajoli's face in the dark, but he knew the smell that was ever with her – the clean woman smell, like rain-wet earth that was part of her. He spoke words of caress, words lain buried in his feelings.¹⁹⁵

Afterwards the soldier feels guilty and gets Kajoli hospitalised in Calcutta. K. R. Chandrasekharan, one of the first critics of Bhattacharya's work, writes that 'a careful reading of the episode [the first incident] makes it abundantly clear that she was raped [...] At the same time the incident is placed in such a context that neither of the two persons involved deserves unqualified blame'.¹⁹⁶ That Chandrasekharan finds it difficult to blame the soldier seems to be based on Bhattacharya's efforts at

becomes a big task, since the English language has a "genius" of its own. Even the novelist writing in Indian vernaculars has to face a similar problem. How to render in literary language the speech of common people without making mincemeat of grammar?' (p. 47).

¹⁹³ That the novel was highly successful in rendering the particular and the historical can be understood by the fact that it was translated into more than twenty European languages. See Shimer, *Bhabani*, p. 34.

¹⁹⁴ See Kelleher, *Feminization*, pp. 162-221.

¹⁹⁵ Bhattacharya, *Hungers*, p. 150.

¹⁹⁶ Chandrasekharan, *Bhabani*, p. 22.

humanising the soldier (his sexual/biological need) and his remarks on his ‘good’ character in getting Kajoli hospitalised.¹⁹⁷ The complexity of categorisation (the rape) appears to arise from what Bhattacharya sees as an ethical confusion of sexual demand and moral standards in times of need. In order to situate a nationalist ideology, Bhattacharya’s narrator seems to give rape the linguistic registers of biological need. But as Kelleher argues, the soldier’s act is symbolic of patriarchy where philanthropy follows injustice.¹⁹⁸ Bhattacharya’s treatment of the issue also makes his narrator (and by implication him as well) complicit in this colonial system of injustice. At the same time, it would, however, be wrong not to acknowledge Bhattacharya’s condemnation of the native upper-class bourgeois characters for their callous response to, and shameless exploitation of, the famine conditions. In a meeting on rice-hoarding by the city businessmen, Sir Abalabandhu, a highly respected native who runs black market rackets in pharmaceuticals and pays the government handsome tax returns, tells his friends including Samarendra about another friend who preys on young girls. He justifies his friend’s gruesome acts: ‘That girl would have starved otherwise. Starved, thinned into a skeleton, and died. My friend treated her with great kindness and consideration. He paid her very generously, I can tell you – much more than she had the right to claim’.¹⁹⁹ Bhattacharya presents and condemns many such characters who profited from the famine conditions and helped frame the rise of prostitution in the city. His hesitation in speaking about rape seems to come from his unwillingness to push the bourgeois moral crisis further. As Rajender Kaur has recently written, ‘[t]he only way these texts [*So Many Hungers!* and *He Who Rides a Tiger*] can contain the crisis is by deflecting attention, so that the revolution that takes place is the glorious one of national independence, which promises to be the cure for all ills and injustices’.²⁰⁰ Bhattacharya was well aware of the historical origins of the famine – colonial capitalism and imperialist war. In order to fight those factors and the

¹⁹⁷ However, Chandrasekharan’s words, ‘neither of the two persons involved deserves unqualified blame’, make Kajoli partly responsible for the rape too. Chandrasekhar, who reads Bhattacharya sympathetically, thinks that Kajoli’s naked and unprotected body in the dead of the night provokes the soldier, who is far away from his wife and sexual pleasure. This is an orthodox, conservative, and patriarchal reading of rape and gender injustice. I think this reading also should neither be detached from the context of the novel, which represents a time of dire social and gender crisis, nor from the context of Chandrasekharan’s reading in the early 1970s when gender movements in a recently liberated India from colonial rule were still in their early stages.

¹⁹⁸ Kelleher, *Feminization*, p. 202.

¹⁹⁹ Bhattacharya, *Hungers*, p. 182.

²⁰⁰ Kaur, p. 277.

imminence of historically produced disasters, he knew that a nation would need a united and formidable bourgeois leadership. Not only are his main characters (Rahoul and Devata) bourgeois male intellectuals promulgating nationalism, but his 'shaping vision' is also the Nehru-Gandhi philosophy of a nation ruled primarily by the bourgeoisie. The proletariat, he suggests, would always need an important educated mediator to authorise their rights and entitlements.²⁰¹ Unlike the publication of Tarashankar's or Manik's novels, this novel was published a month after the independence (1947). The decade of the 1940s was deeply ravaged by different kinds of disasters, war, famine, revolts, communal riots, and anti-colonial movements. The very event of independence was also bloodied by the momentous decision of the Partition of India. The unending national suffering needed a safety valve of release. Thus the ending of the novel shows a utopian concept of nation-building where the male intellectuals, prior to independence, have finally turned the peasants and workers into conscientious agents. In the final scenes of the novel, Kajoli, who was sold to a brothel, escapes from it and is seen to sell newspapers on the streets inspired by people's (especially her family's and Devata's) participation in the national liberation movement and their sustained endurance of physical pain. The narrator also notes that the other protagonist, Rahoul, a bourgeois intellectual, has joined the movement and been arrested by the police. It is through their consciousness of and sacrifice for the nationalist cause that, Bhattacharya suggests, a socialist state can be built in the near future.

Scholars have criticised this abrupt ending and the general structure of the novel. C. Paul Varughese, for instance, writes that 'An artist, who turns recent events into fiction, cannot easily succeed; for the unconscious mind requires much time to perform its wonder of transmuting incidents into art'.²⁰² What they seem to miss in these conventional understandings of art is that a disaster does call for certain immediate and long-term changes and mutations within existing forms of representational art. The question is not whether the novel comes out as a wonderfully structured art, but rather what levels of rupture in cognition does the novelist have to

²⁰¹ In the case of *He Who Rides a Tiger*, we see the illiterate Kalo teaching himself the Western principles of scientific thinking from her daughter's school-books. This paves way to his being placed in the bourgeois sphere later, and allows the possibility of anti-bourgeois, anti-colonial subaltern leadership to take place, albeit briefly.

²⁰² Varughese qtd in Chandrasekharan, *Bhabani*, p. 9.

go through in order to address the huge cataclysm and trauma as a witness or a contemporary. Writing immediately after the famine, Bhattacharya's novel was meant to play the role of both a historical document and a literary medium that negotiates with the collective tragedy. In order to do that, he shifts registers, sometimes very quickly, from the historical and the political-economic, to journalistic, ethnographic, linguistic, and ethical-philosophical ones, and suggests powerfully that famine as a particular kind of disaster requires the use of these resources. At the same time, he could hardly dispense with his bourgeois, male-gendered political ideal in a time of India's entrance to the post-independence, postcolonial period. Through the predominant use of this analytical-affective mode, he reminded us that independence was preceded by a dire moment of historical crisis, and that to challenge and tackle the issues born of this crisis, we would need a visionary politics of humanistic ideals and uniform leadership.

Scarcity, Starvation and the Postcolonial Indian Literary Imagination: Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve*

But these ideals could hardly be materialised in the postcolonial period which saw several chapters of food crisis, drought, and famine. Most of the novels written in this period either refer to or are based on topics of food and scarcity.²⁰³ Bhattacharya's next novel, *Music for Mohini* (1952),²⁰⁴ has extended discussions on food and poverty, while his third novel, *He Who Rides a Tiger* (1954), revisits the Bengal famine and narrativises the suffering and tribulations of a lower-caste rural protagonist, Kalo. Since famine appears as a background in this novel, the modal improvisation – the use of analytical style, journalistic techniques, and varied linguistic-affective registers – in the previous novel is missing here. In R. K. Narayan's *The Guide* (1958),²⁰⁵ the railway-guide Raju, having experienced everything from penury and starvation to wealth, fraudulence, and imprisonment, is turned into a saint by the rural population due to his bearded face and renunciatory mode of living in a remote place in the village of Mangal. The villagers want him to go through the saintly ordeals and bring rain to

²⁰³ C. Paul Varughese comments that food becomes a dominant metaphor and formal principle as it is of primary importance for questions of human dignity and humanity. See Varughese qtd in Anil Kumar Bhatnagar, *Kamala Markandaya: A Thematic Study* (New Delhi: Sarup & Sons, 1995), p. 19.

²⁰⁴ Bhattacharya, *Music for Mohini* (London: Crown Publishers, 1952).

²⁰⁵ R. K. Narayan, *The Guide* (New Delhi: Penguin, 2006).

this drought-ravaged land. Narayan describes how crime, death, and violence rise in the village due to the lack of food. The novel ends as Raju, standing in a dry river and praying to God, collapses, whispering that the rains are coming, that he can feel the cold water running beneath his feet. Food, starvation, and scarcity appear to be the organising principles of the narrative here, which force sainthood upon Raju and compel Narayan to use the various narrative strategies of prolepsis and analepsis, free indirect discourse, irony, and mythical interpolation to build Raju's past and relate it to the present where he is given the chance to absolve his guilt through the sainthood discourse.²⁰⁶ In another novel, Mulk Raj Anand's *The Road* (1961),²⁰⁷ which is based on the problem of roads and transportation in a newly independent India, tells the story of Bhikhu who works feverishly to earn money so that he can provide a day's meal for his family. These novels use the first- or third-person narratives and free indirect discourse to show how social and historical forces compel the lower- and middle-class characters to struggle for food, starvation, and death in a newly-independent nation. Since independence brings little change for the lower classes in socio-economic conditions or is unable to guarantee even the most fundamental right in postcolonial democracy – the right to food – there is an abundance of disillusionment and dejection in the narratives, rendered through the stylistic device of irony and the juxtaposition of contradictory images and motifs.²⁰⁸ This kind of writing, using art as a medium for direct and critical engagement with the oppressive structures of society and for finding possibilities to overcome them, rose to international prominence during the Great Depression era and came to be known widely as the social realist narrative. International writers such as Upton Sinclair, John Steinbeck, Tillie Olsen, Meridel Le Sueur, John Dos Passos, Jack London, George Orwell, Margaret Harkness, and Indian writers such as Mulk Raj Anand, Premchand, Saratchandra Chattopadhyay, and others variously contributed to the enriching of this mode of writing. It would be wrong, however, as David Tucker has shown, to assume that there is any fundamental

²⁰⁶ For a reading on the complex narrative techniques in the novel, see Krishna Sen, *Critical Essays on R. K. Narayan's The Guide* (Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 2004), pp. 8-25, pp. 65-120. Although Sen talks at length about the representation of social reality, she misses the points on hunger and food. Indeed, food and hunger have rarely been discussed as form-giving elements for the novel.

²⁰⁷ Mulk Raj Anand, *The Road* (Bombay: Kutub Popular, 1967).

²⁰⁸ For a study of theme and structure in post-independence novels, see Meenakshi Mukherjee, *The Twice-Born Fiction: Themes and Techniques in the Indian Novel in English* (Delhi: Arnold Heinemann, 1971).

homogeneity in the use of social realism.²⁰⁹ What is argued here on the other hand is that scarcity and starvation, the most immediate and widely visible truths in post-independence India, compel the production of a particular realist mode of loss and suffering, which is different from that of the novels that engage directly with a disaster or revisit the conditions of the disaster. There are many similarities in the narrative treatments of personal loss or in the authors' attitudes and perceptions, but there are also fundamental differences in the organisation of formal principles or in the use of structural devices or modal preferences. I will substantiate these arguments with a brief observation on a novel by Kamal Markandaya, *Nectar in a Sieve* (1954).²¹⁰

Nectar in a Sieve is Markandaya's first novel, which instantly brought fame to the novelist.²¹¹ It is about the story of Rukmani, a peasant woman who recounts her post-marital life of living under the socio-economic conditions of landless agriculture, industrialisation, and drought, her forced migration to the city, and the perennial desire within a peasant's mind to get back to her village and family. The novel is shaped by food discourses throughout – every chapter of the novel refers to aspects of cultivation, vegetable-growing, rice, irrigation, healthy bodies, eating, etc. The focal point changes to starvation, skeletal figures, and philosophical thoughts on hunger, as drought and inflation ravage the unnamed village. Markandaya very clearly indicates that there are two economic forces responsible for the plight of the peasant family – landless farming and industrialisation. Nathan is a landless farmer who pays his land rents via a contractor to an unknown landlord and lives off the land's produce. But a flood, followed by a long drought, destroys his crops for successive years and prevents him from paying his rent resulting finally in the loss of his land. Very early on in the novel, Rukmani tells the readers that her husband, like her father too, does not own the land but they save satisfactorily from the harvests: 'From each harvest we saved, and had

²⁰⁹ Social realism is often understood as interchangeable with socialist realism. There are important convergences as there are crucial differences. For a study based on Britain, see *British Social Realism in the Arts since 1940*, ed. by David Tucker (London: Palgrave, 2011).

²¹⁰ Kamala Markandaya, *Nectar in a Sieve* (Bombay: Jaico, 1956).

²¹¹ Almost all her critics acknowledge this – which also partly supports the argument that this form of writing in the aftermath of the independence had a ready audience and a welcoming creative atmosphere. At the same time, she was accused of orientalist tendencies and pandering to the West in her rendering of poverty and hunger. As Rosemary M. George writes, 'In India by the mid-1970s, Markandaya's reputation became fixed as a rootless and reclusive writer who had catered to the West in a series of novels that were deemed overly poverty fixated, sexually explicit, exotic recreations of India or of foreigners in Europe'; see George, 'Where in the World did Kamala Markandaya Go?', *Novel: A Forum on Fiction*, 42.3 (2009), pp. 400-09 (p. 406).

gunny-sacks full of the husked rice stored away in our small stone-lined granary. There was food plenty'.²¹² But this comfortable situation turns into tragedy due to successive 'natural calamities'. A land that Nathan has been tilling for generations is gone in a moment, and he becomes professionally crippled. Forced to migrate to an unnamed city, he mourns the tragic loss of his 'ancestral' land and worries that he is not skilled to do any job in a city: 'This city is no place for me, I am lost in it. And I am too old to learn to like it'.²¹³ He eventually dies there. This situation points to the plight of millions of peasants who did not have, and continue to not have, a land of their own and had to work as bonded labourers, sharecroppers, or tenant farmers. Although Markandaya does not specify the time period for her novel, her references to a British doctor named Kenny and the building of a tannery in a village allude to the social context in late-colonial India. As I mentioned in the previous chapter, a number of novels by Tarashankar Bandyopadhyay, Kalindi Charan Panigrahi, A. Bapiraju, Gojananda T. Madkholkar, Nanak Singh, and others, point out the similar socio-economic consequences of industrialisation in the colony – the dismantling of rural society, the loss of land for tenant farmers, and forced migration to suburbs and cities in post-First World War India, and so on.²¹⁴ Nathan and Rukmani's migration and Nathan's death are tragic expressions of the economic shift from a dominant agricultural mode of production (with its social hierarchies where farmers are dependent on the landlord for land) to the mode of industrialisation (where farming becomes either increasingly limited or highly sophisticated). Markandaya's narrative style is shaped by this stage and nature of modernisation, as it bears similarities with Bhattacharya's work in responding to the long agrarian crisis and the social conditions of late-colonial modernity.

Industrialisation is mainly depicted here through the building of a tannery in the village precincts. Rukmani shows her displeasure at the tannery from the beginning. She is aware of the better income she earns from the vegetables she grows in her backyard, for the tannery and the demands of its city-bred people have doubled the prices of vegetables and everyday commodities in the village; yet she is saddened by the fact that her relation with the flattering and loving client, Old Granny, is over

²¹² Markandaya, *Nectar*, p. 7.

²¹³ Ibid, p. 177.

²¹⁴ For a discussion, see Sisir Kumar Das, *A History of Indian Literature*, p. 296.

now.²¹⁵ Ironically, inflation in price helps the villagers in the beginning, but as the drought continues, the prices of rice and other food soar due to hoarding and black-marketing, preventing them from buying any food. Along with the tannery comes the urban lifestyle – the rowdy street life, the shops and money culture, the din and bustle of the factory – which for Rukmani spoils the traditional rural culture and ecosystem. Rukmani reflects at one point that she cannot hear any bird songs these days, ‘for the tanner lay close—except crows and kites and such scavenging birds, eager for the town’s offal’.²¹⁶ Although she, an educated village woman, is concerned about these environmental and economic issues, her peers, Kunthi, Janaki, Kali, and others find these concerns ‘queer’, and ‘stupid’.²¹⁷ Indeed, some of them support the decisions by the village’s youth to join the factory, to save money and enjoy the new lifestyle. Through Kunthi, Markandaya also shows how women are seduced by the tannery men for money and ornaments, or are forced into sex trade in exchange for food during the drought (Rukmini’s daughter Ira goes through this tragic experience²¹⁸). The tannery also brings a rising culture of crime. The tannery owners make stricter laws against workers’ rights, working hours, wage payment, and stealing. Rukmani’s eldest sons, conscious of their workers’ rights, fall prey to these laws and are suspended (eventually journeying to Sri Lanka for jobs), while another son is killed for allegedly stealing from the factory during the drought. So, the tannery is not understood here as a disturbance to the rural life system, but as one that totally dismantles the villagers’ lives, that actively reshapes their values, that turns them to be dependent on its mode of production, and that throws them away during crises, stripping them of their last resources of hope and leading to the disintegration of their family.²¹⁹

²¹⁵ Markandaya, *Nectar*, pp. 47-48.

²¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 69.

²¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 29, p. 46.

²¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 98-100.

²¹⁹ Also see in the context, Markandaya’s novel, *A Handful of Rice* (1967) (New Delhi: Orient paperbacks, 1985), which is located again in an unknown city and in an unspecific time period and has strong correspondences to the late-colonial period. Unlike the conditions of landlessness and drought that produce hunger in *Nectar*, hunger here is manufactured by the hoarding of rice and of other essential commodities by corrupt traders like Damodar. Markandaya also shows the essentially connected economic conditions of village and city lives in the capitalist mode of production. For instance, in a diegetic narration about Ravi, the protagonist who has escaped his hereditary role of being a farmer for better living and earning prospects in the city, Markandaya’s narrator tells us, ‘*Bad Harvest* [...] Ravi felt very tired. He thought he had cut clear of all that, very simply by walking out; now here was the slimy tentacle reaching out from the sodden paddy-fields of endless abject villages to clutch at him in the middle of a town’ (emphasis in original; p. 205).

In order to show how landlessness and industrialisation force the tenant farmer into tragic predicaments, Markandaya uses a mode of narration where memoir writing and discursive thinking on hunger converge. The novel begins with Rukmani's thoughts that she can still distinctly remember the days of her marriage forty years earlier. But then it turns to take up the past tense predominantly to record her life-story, until resorting again to the present tense to put closure to the narrative (recalling the narrative technique in Narayan's *The Guide*, although Narayan's is a third-person narrative). Since Rukmani can write in English,²²⁰ this first-person narrative creates the sense that she is writing her own memoir. In this short memoir, she decides to highlight certain events and skip certain others. Sometimes, years have passed within the gap of two sentences or two chapters (chapter one ends as Rukmani, a bride, arrives at Nathan's house, while chapter two begins with the birth of her first child. Between chapters two and six, fourteen years have passed.). This structuring has caused critics to doubt Markandaya's skill in narrative construction.²²¹ However, I think that through such construction, which purposefully relates hunger to temporality, Markandaya is trying to demonstrate how starvation is artificially manufactured in the rural societies and how a body adjusts to the conditions of hunger. These thematic desires and treatments compel a discursive engagement with hunger which is executed through the mode of the personalised memoir. Consider this passage:

For hunger is a curious thing: at first it is with you all the time, waking and sleeping and in your dreams, and your belly cries out insistently, and there is a gnawing and a pain as if your very vitals were being devoured, and you must stop it at any cost, and you buy a moment's respite even while you know and fear the sequel. Then the pain is no longer sharp but dull, and this too is with you always, so that you think of food many times a day and each time a terrible sickness assails you, and became (*sic*) you know this you try to avoid the thought, but you cannot, it is with you. Then that too is gone, all pain, all desire, only a great emptiness is left, like the sky, like a well in drought, and it is now that the strength from your limbs, and you try to rise and find you cannot, or

²²⁰ She will use this skill in the city and write letters for people to earn money so that Nathan and she can go back to their village. Markandaya, *Nectar*, p. 167-68.

²²¹ For instance, M. K. Bhatnagar thinks Markandaya's novels are riddled with 'superficialities and inauthenticities', while Mohan Jha suggests that her works deserve only a 'hasty reading'. There are also critics such as Margaret P. Joseph who engage sympathetically with Markandaya and thinks that the challenges in her structures and the openness in her conclusions are 'uncompromisingly realistic' in their rendering of reality. See, M. K. Bhatnagar, *Kamala Markandaya* (New Delhi: Atlantic, 2002), p. 3; Mohan Jha, 'Indian Novels in English: Notes and Suggestion', in *The Indian English Novel of the New Millennium*, ed. by Prabhat K. Singh (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013), pp. 36-44 (p. 39); see also in this context M. K. Naik who speaks about the 'superficialities' in *A Handful of Rice*, in *A History of Indian English Literature*, p. 237; Margaret P. Joseph, *Kamala Markandaya* (New Delhi: Arnold Heinemann, 1980), p. 65.

to swallow water and your throat is powerless, and both the swallow and the effort of retaining the liquid tax you to the uttermost.²²²

This passage brings to mind immediately Knut Hamsun's descriptions of the physical suffering of an unnamed and hungry artist in his novel *Hunger* (1890),²²³ or more recently a passage from Aki Ollikainen's novel of the 1866-68 Finnish famine, *White Hunger* (2012) where the narrator, through the child Matalaena's consciousness, compares hunger to a struggling kitten trapped in a sack to be thrown into an icy lake.²²⁴ Hunger is understood here as a being, an actively working part of the body – something that we carry with us every day, but something that also devours us as it grows. In this, it is given a parasitic dimension, eating not only the internal organs of the body, but also what is left of the body itself, destroying the entire organic system. The only remedy is food, but food does not help the body regain strength. It just makes the body duller, until the body gradually empties out of strength and hunger becomes a phenomenon of the mind, creating illusions of strength, food, and resources. This embodied nature of hunger has been powerfully covered in Maud Ellmann's work, *The Hunger Artists* (1993), where Ellmann notes how artists use hunger and anorexia to register their resistant political statement.²²⁵ The narration of the passage in Markandaya offers further insight into hunger. The narration appears to be full of confidence, as if the narrator were fully aware of hunger and its stages, their everyday presence in the peasants' lives. The sentences have a motional state, a speedy syntax – long sentences divided into smaller parts joined by commas or colons. This indicates the different states and processes that the body has to go through when sieged by hunger. Also note the constant use of second-person narrative, where the reader is included in the narrator's discourse as one who fully and assertively participates in the

²²² Markandaya, *Nectar*, pp. 87-88.

²²³ See Knut Hamsun, *Hunger*, trans. by Sverre Lyngstad (New York: Penguin, 1998). Compare the protagonist's thoughts here, 'During this fruitless effort my thoughts began to get confused again—I felt my brain literally snap, my head was emptying and emptying, and in the end it sat light and void on my shoulders. I perceived this gaping emptiness in my head with my whole body' (p. 28); or, 'I seemed to have become too feeble to steer or guide myself where I wanted to go; a swarm of tiny vermin had forced its way inside me and hollowed me out' (p. 17).

²²⁴ Compare the narration: 'Hunger is the kitten Willow-Lauri put in a sack, which scratches away with its small claws, causing searing pain; then more scratching, then more, until the kitten is exhausted and falls to the bottom of the sack, weighing heavily there, before gathering its strength and starting a fresh struggle. You want to lift the animal out, but it scratches so hard you dare not reach inside. You have no option but to carry the bundle to the lake and throw it into the hole in the ice'. Aki Ollikainen, *White Hunger*, trans. by Emily Jeremiah and Fleur Jeremiah (London: Peirene Press, 2015), pp. 46-47.

²²⁵ Maud Ellmann, *The Hunger Artists: Starving, Writing, & Imprisonment* (London: Virago, 1993).

discussion. The reader is supposed to know these stages because everyone suffers from hunger, either for small or prolonged periods, especially if the reader is from the ex/colonised societies where hunger, drought, and malnutrition predominate. There is also the use of sharp and evocative imagery. The dried nature of the body in hunger, the emptying out of strength, is compared with the sky or a dry well in drought. While the sky is a standard metaphor for suggesting emptiness, a dry well is a pointed one, for it most painfully suggests that there is no water anywhere: the rivers and ponds have dried up, and there is no rain; even the well, which has been dug very deep to store water artificially, has succumbed to the same condition. Without water, the body realises that it is dying in parts, and that even a temporary availability of water only worsens the condition. These are some philosophical realisations regarding hunger, presented through the use of an improvised structure and pointed imagery. While some of these structures do appear in Bhattacharya's novel (recall for instance the stock market scene), the philosophical and biological aspects of the discussions are largely missing in his work. I would argue that Bhattacharya, a historian and journalist, whose novel was written in the immediate aftermath of the famine, was more concerned with depicting the extreme tragic situations that hunger gave birth to, the cries for food and the deaths on the streets of Calcutta, and with analysing the situation, than with engaging discursively with the state of hunger. The latter could only be done from a relative distance when the immediate tragedy was over. Indeed, Bhattacharya's *He Who Rides a Tiger*, which was published in the same year as *Nectar*, has sections where Kalo speculates on the relations between hunger, law, and caste.²²⁶ Markandaya through this depiction seems to not only speak of hunger and its everyday nature in Indian villages, but also comment on the links between production systems, economic and social stratification, and the inevitability of the situation. Post-independence India saw huge investments in heavy industrialisation by the state, in the concepts of progress and modernisation of the villages. Markandaya, by setting the novel in a late-colonial period and by publishing it in the immediate postcolonial times, admonished the terrible socio-economic future awaiting the villagers. If the postcolonial period

²²⁶ For instance, when Kalo is arrested for looking 'suspiciously' at the modern luxury buildings in Calcutta, is taken to the magistrate, and pleads his innocence, the magistrate asks: 'Why did you have to live?'. Kalo is shocked and can only answer, 'I'm a worm, sir, it is nothing that I live or die'. He is shocked because he had a different and a favourable notion of colonial law in his village. During the famine times, space, caste and administrative/legal judgements appear linked. See, Bhattacharya, *Tiger*, p. 36.

was beset with hunger, food crises, and starvation, state policies only worsened the conditions by not taking care of the hierarchised nature of agriculture in India, by ignoring a large mass of landless agriculturalists, and by shifting the focus onto heavy industrialisation which further stripped the agriculturalists of their jobs. These perceptions and social commentaries are sharply rendered through the use of a personalised, fast-skipping, memoir style of narration, which allows discourses of an intimate and strategic engagement with body and its adjustments to hunger, in order to indicate the irony and pathos of the situation.

In the essay ‘Socio-literature’, Markandaya writes that two centuries of colonialism, imperialism, and racism have shaken to the core the values of mutual love and peaceful co-existence. Indian literature at the crucial postcolonial juncture does not have the luxury to avoid these issues of historical subjection. She emphasised the need to write a ‘socio-literature’ or the ‘literature of concern’, which is not propaganda/didacticism but ‘a representation of what is like to be there and feel it happening to you’.²²⁷ I think novel-writing or artistic activity in general points to this social turn in the immediate aftermath of independence. There is a dominant tendency in writers/artists to use a mode that situates a personalised tragic narrative to historicise the conditions of scarcity and starvation in the postcolonial aftermath. Through this mode they tell us how literature of this period mirrors and documents a disillusioned social reality in a tremendously self-conscious, critical, and suggestive manner. As we now move to the final section of the chapter and take up a Bengali novel published in 1982, we see that many of these indications and realisations on manufactured hunger and starvation remain relevant even thirty-five years after independence. What is however striking about this novel is that in order to revisit the 1943 Bengal famine, the novelist uses a metafictional mode – a film being made on the famine within the narrative – and various technical innovations to imply that though the famine is over, the conditions of starvation and malnutrition continue to ravage the rural society in Bengal and around.

²²⁷ Markandaya qtd in Joseph, *Kamala*, p. 216.

Amalendu Chakraborty's *Ākāler Sandhāne*: Metafictional Mode of a Post-Disaster Postcolonial Society

At the end of Bhabani Bhattacharya's novel, *So Many Hungers!*, Rahoul contemplates the deep and wide effects that the famine will have for the people in postcolonial rural Bengal: 'a physically shattered race' and a deep 'inner degradation'.²²⁸ Rahoul's worries will not be entirely correct, yet Amalendu Chakraborty's (1934-2009)²²⁹ work, *Ākāler Sandhāne* (1982; *In Search of Famine*)²³⁰ presents a social picture of the postcolonial rural Bengal which is not very different either. The novel is about a film crew from Calcutta visiting the village of Hatui, located in the small-town of Mohanpur, to make a film based on the 1943 famine. The famine is said to have had brutal effects on this part of the world which is 'visible' in the villagers' emaciated bodies, their chronic starvation, and malnutrition problems. As in Bhattacharya's work, this novel is also about shuttling between the urban and rural areas: the urban comes to the rural and through the film script redeploys the famine there, pushing the villagers to confront their tragic past and to evaluate their current condition of being. This is done through the use of irony and the metafictional mode of the famine script within the main narrative of filming the famine. There are further stylistic importations from film and theatre, given the fact that the novel was written after a film script by Chakraborty for Mrinal Sen's acclaimed production of the same name (1980).²³¹ The narrative is improvised on many levels, marking a set of ruptures, mutations, and

²²⁸ Bhattacharya, *Hungers*, p. 189.

²²⁹ Amalendu Chakraborty was born in undivided Bengal and was brought to Calcutta in the early 1940s. In his teens, he was witness to the traumatic chapters of famine, riots, and war, and to the resistance movements by leftist organisations. As member of the Communist Party of India, he worked on many fronts, mainly in the capacity of a social worker. His novels, the majority of which are set in urban premises, aim to bring out the political and economic tensions in the rural world in post-independence India, through different narrative techniques such as interior monologue, stream-of-consciousness, or broken stories. He received the Sahitya Akademi Award, India's premier literary award, for his novel *Jabajjibon (Entire Life)* in 1986. He wrote numerous short stories, plays, letters, and memoirs. Unfortunately, nothing has been translated into English as of now. What is also sad is the minimal availability of secondary literature on him. For someone versed in Bangla, *YouTube* holds a number of video interviews by and on him.

²³⁰ Amalendu Chakraborty, *Ākāler Sandhāne* (Kolkata: Dey's, 2010).

²³¹ Amalendu's first draft, written in the late 1970's, was made into the film in 1980, and was reconstructed and translated into English (with the name *In Search of Famine*) by Samik Bandyopadhyay in 1983. The novel version was published in 1982, and remains untranslated in English as yet. My study is based on this novel, and all translations are mine. When possible, I have consulted with the reconstructed text.

differences, which, I argue, compellingly correspond to the historical tensions of posterity in postcolonial society and culture.

The novel begins as Paramesh Mitra, a critically acclaimed film director who has come to Mohanpur to direct a film on the famine, is seen to search for an old lady known as Shetolaburi. He saw her first when he came here to select the location – ‘a skeleton of a human whose skin has shrunk and withered, and who walks with a hunchback, draping an old, dirty, and patchy handmade towel over her waist’.²³² Paramesh wants her in the film which would begin with a shot where this old lady is seen sitting at an old temple under an old tree, in a village that has seen several droughts, floods, and levels of torture from the feudal system.²³³ But throughout the month-long production of the film, Shetolaburi is never found. She is reported to be seen here and there, but never caught on camera. In her continued absence, Chakraborty seems to make the suggestion that there is discrepancy between Paramesh’s cinematic expectation and the contemporary social reality. Sympathetic to Left politics but sceptical of the ideology of the leftist Communist Party of India (Marxist),²³⁴ Paramesh is aware of the reasons responsible for the famine – imperialism, war, and corruption. But his reasons based on archival research and secondary literature available on the famine, and his lack of awareness of the everyday life and living in the rural parts of postcolonial Bengal, arrange for a different, if not false, conception of reality. He believes that the historical conditions of the famine can only be properly shown to people if the film is situated in a famine-stricken village. But, at the same time, he is apprehensive of employing village artists in his work, as they lack professional skills in acting. Film for him is not only art but also an industry, a commitment to a huge amount of money, material, and people. It is a ‘trade’.²³⁵

²³² Chakraborty, *Ākāler*, p. 23.

²³³ Ibid, p. 24.

²³⁴ The novel was published in 1982 when the ruling political party in Bengal, the Communist Party of India (Marxist), following strictly the Soviet line of governance, was greatly inclined towards putting the Party directives before art and artistic freedom. There had been long-term ideological problems on politics and aesthetics between the CPI and the CPI (M), and later between these two parties and the CPI (Marxist-Leninist). For an understanding of party-line politics and its debates with committed art and aesthetics in 1970s Bengal, see, variously, Partha Chatterjee, *The Present History of West Bengal: Essays in Political Criticism* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997); Praful Bidwai, *The Phoenix Moment: Challenges Confronting the Indian Left* (New Delhi: HarperCollins, 2015); Ranabir Samaddar, ‘Eternal Bengal’, in *Being Bengali: At Home and in the World*, ed. by Mridula Nath Chakraborty (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014), pp. 181-201; and Shoma A. Chatterji, *Filming Reality: The Independent Documentary Movement in India* (New Delhi: Sage, 2015).

²³⁵ Chakraborty, *Ākāler*, p. 116, p. 215.

Through these contradictions, the novel compels an abiding focus on the question of reality. What is real in realist representation? How is realist representation exploited for commercial success in films? These questions are given an insightful response in a scene when, after a debate on the inadequate representation of the famine in literary and artistic works with Kiranmoy Bhattacharya, a veteran member of the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA) and current actor for the film, a distraught Paramesh looks at his shadow in the school compound of their lodging:

The unstable and swinging lamp on his back has turned his already extended shadow into a wide and unreal form until it is lost in the deep darkness of the night. The broken light on the right-side of the humanities building of the school has created a tattered *composition* of light and dark and extended his shadowy self so much further that the reflection of his head now looks like that of a gigantic monster. If reflection is so false, can celluloid be true? Whatever it is, he has to speak the truth. The truth of art.²³⁶

The author presents here important questions about social reality, art, and truthful representation through the dichotomy of light and darkness. Seen from different angles or with different proportions of light, the same shape can create different forms and meanings. How does one then get to the 'truth' through realist representation? How are truth and reality connected philosophically and materially? Is Paramesh's understanding of reality and truth filtered through his research-based knowledge and his preconceived assumptions of the famine and of the rural people in Bengal? Through the use of free indirect discourse, Chakraborty's narrator enters Paramesh's mind and expresses his doubts over the truth value held by the representational arts such as film or literature. At the same time, there is a clear implication that Paramesh suffers from the anxiety of 'showcasing' truth through art. These elements of doubt and anxiety are configured and accelerated through his various debates on famine and cultural representation with the actor Kiranmoy. A long-time theatre activist, Kiranmoy was involved with the IPTA in the 1940s and became gradually disillusioned with the failure of the IPTA in making theatre a weapon for the masses in post-independence Bengal.²³⁷ For him, reality is not about finding the correct place

²³⁶ Ibid, p. 183. I am emphasising words in the narrative that are originally written in English.

²³⁷ Kiranmoy's character is probably modelled on the notable dramatist, Bijan Bhattacharya, given the close match between the two. Bhattacharya's highly successful works on the famine, such as *Nabanna*, were part of the IPTA and provided future disillusionments on the failed prospects of the organisation,

or a skillful set of actors, but rather about making it communicable to the people whose stories are being staged. He believes in the potential in Paramesh's script, but also criticises in cynical and sometimes abrasive language – an essential hypocrisy within this sort of project which mainly caters to an urban educated class, minting money on the lost causes of the people:

We have turned ourselves into self-nominated guardians of the people through our *films* and *theatre*, our *art* and *culture*, and our *politics*. We are totally fine with this act and comfortably cocooned in our delusional cages. *We live in a circle*. And, look at these poor people like Haren here? *They live in a society*. They are weavers. They know who they are weaving for. They have to know their *market* because of the nature of their job.²³⁸

The hypocrisy of authoritatively speaking the truth for the poor and the vulnerable, Kiranmoy adds, is part of the urban art culture, which tends to capture human conditions of the world within the narrow geographic walls of Calcutta: from the famine in Bengal to the struggles in Vietnam, Rhodesia, or Cuba, everything within a single frame and walled space.²³⁹ Countering Paramesh's 'pathological interest' in knowledge gathered from the archives and in the conviction that posterity allows a better viewpoint for the famine, he asks why films and performance-based art in post-independence India have been largely silent about the Bengal famine, '*that boundless insanity of imperialism that destroyed five million people in Bengal*', why they have not contributed to making strong peasant consciousness or rather any large-scale food movements as such.²⁴⁰ For him, this is inseparably related with the current political ideology, where the postcolonial state arranges for building a dam, the Damodar Valley Corporation, to prevent flood, and then uses it to cause flood at whim so that welfare is understood as a progressive and indispensable ideology for nation-building and national development.²⁴¹ In the same way that the centralised urban-based welfare state controls the occurrence and possibility of disasters at the rural frontiers through

as mentioned in his lecture on the 25th anniversary of *Nabanna*. See Bijan Bhattacharya, *Nabanna*, 1983.

²³⁸ Chakrabarty, *Ākāler*, p. 138. I am emphasising the word originally spoken in English.

²³⁹ Ibid, p. 138; though he is part of the Calcutta 'Group Theatre', he regards the political ideology of internationalism as baseless, and is against the lack or misrepresentation of domestic or national issues plaguing our everyday life or the life of the peasants, the workers, the tribals and the downtrodden. For a reading of the Calcutta 'Group Theatre', see Bharucha, *Rehearsals*.

²⁴⁰ Ibid, p. 182.

²⁴¹ Ibid, p. 21.

its modernising principles, the urban project of film-making ‘deploys’ the famine in the rural with a cynical distance. There is no meaningful engagement by urban writers and artists with the social reality at the rural frontiers. Thus, later, when Paramesh speaks of the difficulty of realist representation (‘can you imagine, you come out of fantasy straight to an unfamiliar land with some unknown faces on your shoulders, and you are confronted with that crude reality’), Kiranmoy retorts: ‘who is unknown to you? What is fantasy? Which one is reality?’²⁴² This criticism corroborates Kiranmoy’s lampooning of the present urban culture as ideologically too narrow or vague and of the urban artists as ‘the beautiful gods of *metropolitan elitism*’.²⁴³ While Paramesh explains why he is convinced that a rural folk theatre artist cannot represent reality well enough, Kiranmoy’s jagged response goes, ‘the real becomes unreal to you when you extend your hands to it?’²⁴⁴ In these methodological and ideological debates between Paramesh and Kiranmoy, Chakraborty gives us insight into the problems plaguing the postcolonial rural society, and especially into the uncommitted and unmindful discourses of representation by the urban artists and intellectuals. Unlike the IPTA which went to villages and conveyed the truth of the famine to the villagers in an act of organising them for political resistance, films are there mainly to make money, by exploiting the sincere emotions of suffering and tragedy. As one of the crew says later, the crew’s job is not to fight amongst themselves but to finish the film and to send it for consideration at international awards. Chakraborty indicates through these questions that the debate here is not only about postcolonial economy and politics, but also where different art forms fit within the field of culture – captured here in the tussle between cinema and theatre – and how the spheres of politics, economy, and aesthetics are connected. As we continue to barter assumptions and stereotypes, and project a preferred ideological version of reality, *truth* continues to elude us – a truth that requires sincere, empathetic, and critical engagement with the everyday social reality in postcolonial Bengal. Like the ironic image in the above quote of Paramesh’s gigantically growing shadow ‘lost in the deep darkness of the night’, his art also looks unsubstantial and vague.

²⁴² Ibid, p. 246.

²⁴³ Ibid, p. 21, p. 233.

²⁴⁴ Ibid, p. 214.

This dichotomy of truth and art is historicised through the uneven and tragic material conditions of the postcolonial rural society. In their first walk-around in Mohanpur, the venue for filming, the crew discovers the rising urban mode of living in this remote part of the state of West Bengal: street lights, shops on either sides of the street, two-storey houses, king-size cigarettes, and so on. In this moment of excitement and melancholy, characteristic of the *flâneur*, the main actress Nandita points at the existence of television antennae and wonders whether this place can at all represent the periodic reality they want to capture.²⁴⁵ Largely built around jotedars (large landholders), rich peasants, and a petty-bourgeois class of teachers, doctors, and political party workers, Mohanpur appears to be a *bhadralok* neighbourhood. A little later they come to Hatui, the main setting for the famine, and find it to be a small village of lower-caste landless labourers darkened by ‘a shroud as the new moon hangs over it’.²⁴⁶ Against the rise of urbanisation in Mohanpur, Hatui has houses like ‘broken toys’ where people ‘survive, only survive’,²⁴⁷ and rush to the town in surplus numbers for the state’s decree of ‘Food for Work’.²⁴⁸ This highly uneven development is not an anomaly but an integral feature of postcolonial rural India. Speaking of the patterns of urbanisation and settlement in West Bengal, economist Biplab Dasgupta (1987) points out the steady decline in agriculture in parts of postcolonial rural Bengal. The colonial government established the system of Permanent Settlement, but maintained no systematic recovery from calamities such as famine and flood. Postcolonial urbanisation has been equally indifferent to the need to modernise the agricultural system.²⁴⁹ The rise in demand for jute and cotton as raw materials for urban or foreign markets, the crowdedness of villages, and the migration to major cities for factory work or to rural areas for commercial crop production have been further detrimental to an organic economic development of rural society.²⁵⁰ This has eliminated the possibility for food production. Marcus Franda notes how the shift from food crops to cash crops and a strong racket of black-marketing gradually created a huge food crisis in 1960’s Bengal. In his speeches, Franda records, the then Chief Minister P. C. Sen spoke of his inability to ‘demystify’ the ‘sabotage’, but he was convinced that ‘an

²⁴⁵ Ibid, p. 110.

²⁴⁶ Ibid, p. 18.

²⁴⁷ Ibid, p. 19.

²⁴⁸ Ibid, p. 140.

²⁴⁹ Biplab Dasgupta, ‘Urbanization and Rural Change in West Bengal’, *Economic and Political Weekly*, 22.8 (1987), 337-44 (p. 337).

²⁵⁰ Ibid, pp. 338-39.

unholy combination of a section of *jotedars* (large landholders) and rice mill owners' were attempting 'to hoard food now, in the expectations of a greater profit later on'.²⁵¹ This not only echoes the long history of deindustrialisation, uneven commercialisation of agriculture, and the birth of numerous famines and 'natural' disasters in the nineteenth century (echoing Sumit Sarkar's findings mentioned in the previous chapter),²⁵² but also suggests more closely the social conditions behind the Bengal famine, especially the rise of black market, corrupt traders, and hoarders like Girish in Bhabani Bhattacharya's novel. The structural entrenchment of colonial land policy and speculative mode of capitalism is so deep that, despite elaborate rationing and redistribution schemes, Franda notes, the Congress government in power could hardly weather the crisis.²⁵³

This crisis manifests, Chakraborty suggests insightfully here, the spatialisation of caste structures in rural Bengal. Mohanpur is urbanised and aspiringly *bhadralok*, whereas Hatui remains stuck within its lower-caste stigma and harsh poverty. The people of Hatui, we are told, have always worked for the *babus* (the gentry) and the *kartas* (the landlords) as sharecroppers and landless labourers. Following Amartya Sen's thesis of entitlement failure, where Sen explains how the collapse of distribution and exchange systems during the Second World War deprived the dependent section of the producers (artisans, sharecroppers, landless farmers, and craftsmen) of their entitlement to buy food,²⁵⁴ the villagers, mainly from the lower castes, appeared to have faced the famine in its most brutal form. Not much, however, has changed in this social and spatial distributions of violence. There are episodes in the novel where the rural destitute are seen to pick up wheat from the road after a wheat-truck passes by. During the end of the film production, when Paramesh needs a number of people for a scene that captures the migration of the famine-ravaged rural population to Calcutta, the village's youth bring trainloads of emaciated, skeletal people within a short time because these people have been promised a day's food in return.²⁵⁵ The famine may be over in symbolic terms, but, as Rob Nixon tells us, it has now transformed into malnutrition, deprivation, and slow violence.²⁵⁶ The postcolonial political economy

²⁵¹ Marcus Franda, *Radical Politics in West Bengal* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1971), pp. 137-38.

²⁵² Sarkar, *Modern India*, p. 26.

²⁵³ Franda, *Radical Politics*, p. 138.

²⁵⁴ Sen, *Poverty*, p. 77.

²⁵⁵ Chakraborty, *Ākāler*, p. 231.

²⁵⁶ Nixon, *Slow Violence*, p. 2.

has not only widened the economic divide between the urban and the rural, it has furthered the problematic relation of class and caste through the logic of scattered urbanisation. Thus, Mohanpur, a neighbourhood with many landowning peasants, has received all the benefits of the Five Year Planning (a post-independence, Nehruvian, Soviet-influenced vision of development through building heavy industries and social welfare), while Hatui, a village of lower-caste, lower-class people, whose wellbeing was supposed to be monitored by the Mohanpur electoral representatives, receives nothing save the disgust of the higher classes and the unwritten injunction that the Hatui people have to work day in and day out to earn a day's meal. Chakraborty writes with mordant irony here: 'they [the people of Hatui] have learnt much from their ancestors – this is the rule. They should not go near the *babus* or peek in through their windows. Their dark and filthy shadows are said to remain stuck on the glasses like still photos. Then, the glasses become untouchable'.²⁵⁷ There is hardly any change in caste and class relations since independence; there is still no constructive effort at realising the welfare state schemes of socio-economic development for the poorer section of society. The famine is officially over, but for the impoverished it has now turned into an everyday condition of being, a state of malnutrition and constant starvation. The response from Poran Porel, a disabled Hatui villager, to Paramesh's film project is poignant here: 'see, the *babus* have come from the city to search for the 1940's famine. 12 rupees a maund of rice. That famine [...] There is no famine now? [...] *Babu*, we have the famine in our bodies. We have seen famines from birth'.²⁵⁸ The famine is not an isolated social and economic condition but a concrete embodied aspect, quotidian in nature and accumulated in form.

The historical transition from famine to chronic malnutrition, however, is not one of uninterrupted continuity. If the narrative wants to situate the famine of the 1940s in a famine-ravaged village, it has to also take into account the structural and socio-historical changes that have taken place over the years. This is where the metafictional mode becomes important. After the first thirty-two pages, there is a blank page followed by a page recording the details of the film (much like *dramatis personae* in a play), and then the script begins:

²⁵⁷ Chakraborty, *Ākāler*, p. 122.

²⁵⁸ *Ibid*, p. 169.

Undivided Bengal. January 1943.

A flock of white ducks flying in the bright cloudless sky.

Endless horizons of ripe paddy in the field. Peasants, male and female, and in groups, can be seen working in the field. The cheery winter afternoon in the month of harvest.

All of a sudden, there is a blistering sound in the sky, from somewhere higher than the clouds. [...]

Chandradhar and Arjun in close-ups now. They have arisen from their field work, puzzled, and looking up in the sky.²⁵⁹

This is a story of Chandradhar and his family, his son Arjun, and daughter-in-law Savitri in an unnamed village. The narrative begins with the Japanese airplanes, and slowly moves to giving an account of the political factors responsible for the famine: the unabashed and forcible raids of paddy fields by the landlords in the name of war, the abandoning by the land-owning classes of the dependent landless labourers, the relentless torture of the peasants to sell their remaining land, the arrival of the *babus* or townfolk in the villages after the bombings in Calcutta, and the grave suffering and emigration of the rural folk as destitute to the city – reasons that we have already encountered in Bhattacharya's novel. Chakraborty's decision to use the film script within the narrative was not accidental. He knew Mrinal Sen and requested him to do *Ākāler Sandhāne* after watching Truffaut's film-within-a-film narrative in *Day for Night* (1973).²⁶⁰ The metafictional mode, which has a longer history in literature, was powerfully revived by a number of writers from the Third World in the 1970s to posit the shifting political sensibilities of the age.²⁶¹ Chakraborty employs a metafictional mode to tell the story of the famine, which has a singular significance in the history of Bengal and India, and to tell how it transitions into a deeper and broader social crisis

²⁵⁹ Ibid, p. 35.

²⁶⁰ See Siladitya Sen's interview with Mrinal Sen on Chakraborty's work, 'Mrinal Sen on Amalendu Chakraborty', *YouTube* (May 12, 2013) <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bAgY98Iia30>> [accessed Mar 25, 2017].

²⁶¹ On this, see the works of Jorge Louis Borges, 'Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*', in *Labyrinths: Selected Stories and Writings*, eds. by Donald A. Yates and James E. Irby (New York: New Directions, 2007), pp. 88-95; Alejo Carpentier, *Kingdom in This World* (New York: Knopf, 1957); Gabriel García Márquez, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, trans. by Gregory Rabassa (New York: Harper and Row, 1970); Salman Rushdie, *Midnight's Children* (London: Cape, 1981); Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* (London: Cape, 1986); Akhtarujjuman Iliyas, *Chilekothar Sepai* (Dhaka: Dhaka University Press, 1986); and Mo Yan, *Red Sorghum*, trans. by Howard Goldblatt (London: Heinemann, 1993).

of wider forms of deprivation and malnutrition. This mode allows him not only to clearly situate the main historical causes of the famine (imperialism, war, capitalism, and even the Quit Indian agitations uncovered in Paramesh's research – which is admirable given the fact that the script was written in the early 1970s when studies on the Bengal famine had just begun to attract international attention), but also, and crucially so, to focus on the shifting *typology* of the (middle) classes in contemporary postcolonial rural societies. Paramesh finds in the rich peasants of Mohanpur, Sudhanyo Kundu, Nidhi Dewan or Manik Chatujje, and others, the greedy and immoral characters of Kelo Samanta, Kedar Kongar, and Tarini Mukujje of the famine script. He comes to know via Sukumar that Sudhanyo and Nidhi are angry because the film crew has not rented their house or bought everyday commodities from them, and concludes that these feudalist characters have remained the same. Paramesh is not altogether incorrect here. As we have noticed in the links between the late-colonial famine and postcolonial starvation, the famine plot does have striking resemblance with the rest of the story set in the current time. Indeed, the *babus* who came to the village during the famine brought with them the culture of drinking and prostitution. The film crew was accused of drinking in the school premises and forcing poor women into prostitution. However, despite these similarities and transitions in society, class, and culture, Paramesh fails to observe an essential dissimilarity in the economic and cultural patterns among this current class of village heads: like the urban Paramesh, these people, too, are (and aspire to be) *bhadralok*, which is a colonial social category of native urban upper-caste middle-class people who were educated in English and who imitated western culture and modernity to earn respect from the British.²⁶² In the postcolonial aftermath, modernisation and urbanisation projects of the postcolonial welfare state, the betterment in transportation means, and the FYP schemes, contributed not only to a wide socio-economic development, but also to the

²⁶² For S. N. Mukherjee, *bhadralok* is a category of both caste and class inscriptions: caste since it was built upon the large participation of non-brahminical castes into political organisation and into the acts of scriptural interpretations, bolstered mainly by the rational mode of thinking and of the multi-caste composition of the New Bengal movement; and class because it was a group of suddenly rising, rich, educated natives benefiting from their service to the Empire and imitative of the colonial lifestyle and economic privileges. See, S. N. Mukherjee, 'Class, Caste and Politics in India, 1815-38', in *Elites in South Asia*, ed. by S. N. Mukherjee and Edmund Leach (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), pp. 33-78 (pp. 55-62). For a more nuanced and updated study, see Tithi Bhattacharya, 'The Curious Case of the Bhadrakalok: Class or Sentiment?', in *The Sentinels of Culture: Class, Education, and the Colonial Intellectuals in Bengal 1848-1885* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 35-67.

educational aspirations, the changing taste in cultural patterns and belief, and the questions of social prestige in suburban and rural Bengal. In the very beginning of the novel, for instance, Paramesh meets a boy from a rural hinterland who commutes between his village and Calcutta for his job, wants to open a film society for his people, and runs a radical little magazine from Chakdah, the suburb of Calcutta.²⁶³ As Paramesh remains doubtful of the fuller use of such practices, he meets another boy from Hatui who has just completed his Master of Commerce degree and is now pursuing a job in Calcutta.²⁶⁴ The world is slowly changing, and higher education and good transportation means – the boons of modernisation – are shaping the aspirations of the post-independence rural societies towards modernity and *bhadralok* respectability. These aspirations, however, do not altogether discard or exclude the ritualistic practices deeply ingrained within the rural and suburban cultures. Rituals, old habits, religious and customary practices adapt to, and remain coeval with, modern tastes and culture.²⁶⁵ In a crucial episode, Paramesh goes to Manik Chatterjee's house after the latter's repeated invitation and finds the house to be a big, two-storey building decorated and designed in the manner of the latest urban style. He notices that the room has photographs of Swami Vivekananda, Ramakrishna and Mother Sarada, who are variously understood as saints in Bengal and are both the harbingers of modernity and the preservers of ritualistic Hindu Indianness. Manik claims that he has always encouraged his daughter to join the theatre and performing arts, but after realising that Paramesh is searching for a woman who has to act a prostitute, he abuses Paramesh and throws him out of his house: 'Keep your long lectures with you. First, you're making a rowdy film and forcing the whole village into a bad culture of drinking, crass and debauchery. And now you're looking for girls from *bhaddor* respectable houses to play the roles of whores. Why, what is wrong with our daughters? What have they done? Won't they have to get married? Don't they have respect?'²⁶⁶ These questions clearly suggest if modernity in postcolonial (rural) Bengal means economic development, urbanisation, and the emergence of a *bhadralok* class, it also means the rooted co-existence with old rituals and customs and beliefs in gender and social roles. A woman in an Indian village can acquire modernity through English education and

²⁶³ Chakraborty, *Ākāler*, p. 6.

²⁶⁴ Ibid, p. 87.

²⁶⁵ For a study on how traditions adapt to modernity, see Sudipta Kaviraj, 'Modernity and Politics in India', pp. 137-62 (pp. 156-57).

²⁶⁶ Chakraborty, *Ākāler*, p. 242.

western cultural practices, but she still has to work within the strict perimeters set by the patriarchal society. If Nandita, a Calcutta-born woman, can teach in a college and act the role of Savitri, the one raped in the film, or later Shipra Chakraborty, a gazetted officer's wife, can play Zennat Begam (another victim of rape and prostitution), Manik Chatterjee's daughter cannot because art is not entirely separate from the practices of social reality in the rural world. New artistic and cultural practices arise from the changing consequences of political economy. Kiranmoy, through whom Chakraborty builds this point, reminds Paramesh of this crucial dissimilarity between the rural heads in his film script, who were averse to and suspicious of urban culture and style of living, and the ones in the current times who have embraced urbanity but not without discarding the traditional rural customs and beliefs.²⁶⁷ Kiranmoy reproaches Paramesh, for the latter has not been able to grasp the 'typology' in rural society: 'People don't stay in the same form and manner for thirty-seven years. They are different people from the dimension of *typology* [...] that girl, who is severely scolded by her mother and aunts for not combing her hair in the evening, or by her father and uncles for cutting her nails on a Thursday, cannot be the same girl who can play the role of Malati [the whore]'.²⁶⁸ Things have changed; the mode of governance (the welfare state) and social practices (postcolonial urbanity) have adapted to the new demands. There is no large-scale famine anywhere. But there are innumerable hidden faces of malnutrition and poverty. This metafictional mode is used to suggest the transformation into the postcolonial slow violence of the colonially-produced famine. Chakraborty makes the important point that, amidst this, there is also a rise of respectability within the middle classes, and the pursuit of urbanity and urban culture in rural areas – which defines itself against the uncouthness and rusticity of the lower castes and classes – imitates the metropolitan, and yet distinguishes itself as something purely and ritualistically Indian.

Since the metafiction mode is made to create the simulation of a famine breeding famine-like conditions of long starvation and malnutrition, Chakraborty

²⁶⁷ I would like to mention here that this reading of modernity, which encompasses aspects of modernisation and cultural elements combining native rituals and customs, is not specifically a rural feature, but it is *the* character of modernity *per se*, or more specifically, of postcolonial modernity. In the third chapter, I will show how these combined aspects appear clearly in the urban spheres through reading the works of Nabarun Bhattacharya. This is exactly why realism, born out of the consciousness of modernity, in its postcolonial avatar at least, is extremely experimental, subversive, and accommodative.

²⁶⁸ Ibid, pp. 246-47.

projects the famine story into a separate script – a blank page separating the narration of the current story from the seventy-odd pages which is an uninterrupted film script of the 1943 Bengal famine. Interestingly, this famine script has no closure, but ends with Savitri's character turning gradually into multiple women figures of socio-economic victimisation and of reconstructed agency in postcolonial Bengal, appearing variously in the 1959 food crisis, in the 1964 worker's strike, in the 1967 peasant uprisings, and finally in the character of a very old lady (Shetolaburi) whose wrinkled-face suggests endurance through the cracks and fissures of modernity. The ending of this script is marked by narrative ruptures. Often, the sequential third-person narrative is punctured with newspaper reports:

THE FAMINE WAS AN ACT OF GOD

L. S. Amery, Secretary of State for India

Amrita Bazar Patrika – Tuesday December 14, 1943

[...]

In a heated rally, respected Viceroy of India, Leopold Stenot Amery, speaking about India, and mainly about Bengal, has stated that the famine is an act of god. The British government is doing whatever it can – endless numbers of *friend ambulance units* have been working day and night and taking proper care of the victims, and free gruel is being served to approximately fifteen million people every day.²⁶⁹

Reminiscent of the technique of 'Newsreels' used by Dos Passos in the *USA* trilogy (1930-36),²⁷⁰ reports about the horrible social conditions during the famine fill the pages, one after another. The report is juxtaposed with the sufferings of Chandradhar's family. The journalistic account above, for instance, is followed by the third person narrator: 'So, if the famine is an act of god, holding our tiny and remotely located landlord Sri Kalidhan Samanta responsible for the plight of the peasants should not be right. That he could not lend Chandradhar anything more than half a sack of rice for the latter's entire farming land is because he and his family are also victims of this

²⁶⁹ Ibid, p. 97.

²⁷⁰ The whole trilogy is full of the techniques of 'camera eye' and 'newsreels' which are juxtaposed with the perspectives of the characters. See Dos Passos, *U. S. A.: The 42nd Parallel, Nineteen-Nineteen, The Big Money*. (London: John Lehman, 1950).

God-created, divine, and bizarre famine.’²⁷¹ Hardly can we miss the biting sarcasm here against colonialism and against the native landed elite. Note also how the global/macro-historical aspects are shown to affect the local/micro-historical lives of the remotely located peasants and landlords. The narration moves fast, and the script ends as Chandradhar’s family members are all dead from hunger and from the exploitation of the landlord and money lenders, and Savitri is seen to have joined the destitute in Calcutta, withered, starved, and sexually abused. Through these journalistic inclusions, Chakraborty situates the catastrophic nature of the famine and marks a rupture with the ongoing narrative, which through the interplay of first- and third-person perspectives and various fictional strategies of realist narrative make us forget about the other narrative, i.e. the narrative of the contemporary time of Paramesh and his film-making. This is an important narrative strategy. The ruptured narration and the incomplete closure indicate that the social conditions in these two different times are actually deeply connected, but at the same time lack straightforward transitions from one to the other. The way Paramesh perceives Savitri’s character to be jumping from one agentic character in a social movement to another is politically naïve and idealistic. This is not what Chakraborty understood rural society to be in his long life as social worker in the rural frontiers for the Communist Party of India (Marxist). He shows the connection between these two conditions through the theatrical properties of the interruptive narrative voices of two Hatui villagers. In pseudo-monologic asides (I call them thus because, like asides, they are very much part of the main action of the narrative but not entirely monologic as they are narrated by the omniscient narrator of the current-time narrative), Chakraborty gives brief life-histories of Poran Porel and his wife Durga, who are victims of caste and gender exploitation by the *babus*. Poran wanted to escape class and caste stigma by working at an urban factory. But he loses his right hand in a train accident and comes back to the village as a disabled person, unable to continue even his caste-bound job as a landless (bonded) labourer, and has to depend on his wife’s earning. Durga agrees to play the role of Malati (the whore) against her husband’s wishes because the role would provide food and milk for her severely undernourished and dying child. But she fails to do the shot because her memories with the class of people about to rape her are too sharp and private to disclose to the public (she was actually raped for asking

²⁷¹ Ibid, p. 97.

for food for her baby), and because, in the rural world, social reality and art are not separate. The film that projects reality in the village attempts to find contemporary value and meaning in Hatui and is thus too real to be made there. The rural world still has not recovered from the tragedy of centuries of exploitation, droughts, famines, and malnutrition, to understand the critical distance required for a film production. As Durga hides her face crying while a crowd gathers around in anger, Paramesh has to 'pack up' after this shot and leave. But the novel does not end here, the narrator says: 'But Mohanpur remains there, even after all this. Life flows in Hatui'.²⁷² Durga's child dies, but Poran does not beat her this time. They leave for the city for the final time to find work and start again. Meanwhile, Shetolaburi is seen to forage for food. The final lines of the novel are evocative:

After ages of epidemics, famines, and floods, until from the sin or from the tiredness of living long in this withered body her hunchback does not turn her back in a right angle with her waist, until her unevenly shaking head comes stooping down and her forehead widens into the earth and gets muddled, the old, very old Shetolaburi would continue to peck at the grains and forage for food holding a broken and dry sprig.²⁷³

The irony is that the film crew never manages to find her but believes that she is dead, while Shetolaburi is very much alive, fighting death with the age-old reality of searching for food and surviving (recall what Chakraborty's narrator told of the Hatui people in the beginning: they 'survive, only survive'). Paramesh wants her to be the future of the character Savitri in the film who is to be raped and tortured but never gives up, and participates in various resistant political movements based on food and famine. In the film's incompletion and the novel's ending with Shetolaburi, Chakraborty suggests that the filmic projection is determinate and sensational. The utopian reality it wants to convey has no substance, because it is at a far remove from the everyday world of malnutrition, suffering, and survival that postcolonial Bengal constitutively stands for. History acts out in a continual (cyclical) manner, and not in a transcendental fashion. Shetolaburi must have seen many such moments of harsh reality, but she does not have to be the stereotypical victim of urban modes of

²⁷² Ibid, p. 268.

²⁷³ Ibid, pp. 269-70.

oppression and perception. There are ruptures in history as there are continuities. Shetolaburi's absent presence is both a rupture and a continuity symbolically.

In summary, Chakraborty's novel brings up a very important aspect of famine and disaster: how disasters transition into a historical crisis. As Eric Cazdyn has noted, disasters cannot be discussed without the phenomenon of crisis.²⁷⁴ Where Chakraborty strikes with insight is the idea of ruptured historical continuity. He focuses on the Bengal famine with distinct historicity, and presents how the great destruction of economy, life, and community remains unresolved – how the society has to negotiate the everyday present with the traumatic past. These two events are separate and yet deeply interlinked. One just does not transition into the other easily and uncritically. The constitutive differences (as in Kiranmoy's typology) have to be pointed out as much as the resemblances are to be highlighted. Since this disaster is closely followed by the liberation from colonisation, the continuity needs to be further located in the question of the postcolonial politics of the social welfare state. This is what Chakraborty does through the narrative exploitation of irony, dichotomy, and interruptive techniques, which variously consolidate the metafictional mode and constitutively undermine a sequential linear mode of realist narrative, and yet indicate realistically how, in the aftermath of disaster, postcolonial Bengal is ridden with the crisis of malnutrition, starvation, and slow violence.

The capitalist tendencies of the welfare state tends to perpetuate these conditions in a post-disaster postcolonial society. Bhabani Bhattacharya's novel, written and published in a decade crowded with and punctured by various kinds of disasters, was meant to explore the historical reasons responsible for the famine for a better postcolonial future. He uses an analytical-affective mode to find out links between capitalism, colonialism, war, and disaster. Writing close to the event and working as a journalist just before shifting to fiction-writing, he could not *not* document the enormous nature of violence and crisis in contemporary life and society. This ethnographic element compels him to adopt a melodramatic tone and a vernacular bent of language, bringing through the acts the local and global nature of the disaster into a dialectical framework. Both Chakraborty and Bhattacharya use the realist framework of analysis and narration, but they also significantly complicate the form

²⁷⁴ Cazdyn, 'Disaster', p. 648.

through their dominant use of modes, the choice of which is shaped by the specificity of the historical conjunctures that their writings address. I have argued that this *brand* of realism is different from the social realist framework of the post-independence era novels based generally on scarcity and starvation. To recall our discussions on how disaster might shape literary form, these findings push me to consider whether we would need a new interpretative category for disaster writing that carefully studies the specific historical conjuncture, nature, and orientation of a disaster, and the global forces responsible for its occurrence. A study of this kind may help us see how disaster-based narratives are not aesthetically limited or technically weak, but are historically conscious and politically energetic modes of expression.

CHAPTER THREE

During and After the Naxalbari Movement: The Case of Critical Irrealism

In Amalendu Chakraborty's *Ākāler Sandhāne* (1982), the landless agriculturalist Poran Porel offers the crucial insight that the famine of 1943 might be over but the consequences are too starkly visible in the villagers' emaciated bodies.²⁷⁵ Chakraborty suggests through the metafictional mode that the slow violence of this chronic scarcity is as devastating as the famine itself. These famine and starvation conditions gave birth to several food movements in Bengal, Bihar, and Orissa, most notably in 1959 and in 1966, which were based on issues of sharecropping, bonded labour, price hike, black marketing, starvation, as well as protest against the *jotedar* reign in the rural areas. As the situation became worse, these movements and agitations turned into an organised tribal-peasant uprising in Naxalbari in 1967. The uprising took dramatic turns in the next five years, spreading like wildfire to other parts of the country, until being severely crushed by the repressive machineries of the state. This chapter looks at the socio-economic and political contexts of the movement and the conditions in its aftermath through a reading of novels that register them.²⁷⁶ The violent and abrupt nature of the movement, I argue, forces socially committed writers to develop different modes of realist representation in order to grapple with the specific nature of political crisis and to critique establishment politics. Mahasweta Devi uses a quest mode in which she sets an apolitical person or a dedicated Communist Party member to find out about their son or friend who was associated with the movement and killed or disappeared by the State. Nabarun Bhattacharya, writing thirty years later and trying to engage with the issue of exploitation of the urban poor by multinational capitalism, repeatedly employs an urban fantastic mode that records how the legacy of Naxalism (the methods and tactics of warfare and resistance) shapes the (imagined) everyday life of the margins of contemporary urban society. Drawing on Michael Löwy's work,

²⁷⁵ Chakraborty, *Ākāler*, p. 169.

²⁷⁶ I am using the term 'Naxalbari' to refer to the historic movement, and 'Naxalite' to address figures, texts, aspects, etc. associated with this movement.

these modes are understood as constituting a ‘critical irrealist’ literary form. In reading the form in the rural-postcolonial context rather than the European metropolitan context that Löwy uses it in, the chapter complicates and expands the possibilities within this framework.

The Naxalbari Movement, Representation, and Critical Irrealism

The Naxalbari movement began as an organised armed response to the jotedar exploitation in the Naxalbari area of Bengal. Naxalbari is situated in the northern part of West Bengal – an eastern state in India – at the foothills of the Himalayas, a periphery of Kolkata. Comprising tribal people, most of whom are landless agriculturalists, share-croppers, and tea plantation workers, the economy of these parts is predominantly agricultural.²⁷⁷ It has long been controlled and overseen by the jotedars. Born as an offshoot of the Permanent Settlement Act (1793), the jotedars were the traditional caretakers of cultivable land (or *jot*), paying revenues to the *zamindars* or landlords. Historians Ratna Ray and Rajat Ray note that the jotedars ‘owned sizeable portions of village lands and cultivated their broad acres with the help of share croppers, tenants-at-will, and hired labourers’, and exploited the peasantry for revenue.²⁷⁸ In the post-independence era, the jotedars, who had control over both a

²⁷⁷ Edward Duyker, *Tribal Guerrillas: The Santals of West Bengal and the Naxalite Movement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), pp. 4-5.

²⁷⁸ Ratna Ray and Rajat Ray, ‘Zamindar and Jotedars: A Study of Rural Politics in Bengal’, *Modern Asian Studies*, 9.1 (1975), 81-102 (p.82). Debal SinghaRoy notes that the jotedar exploitation would include the institutionalised means from ‘rack-renting, sub-infeudation, fragmentation of holdings, indebtedness, increasing taxation, market manipulation’, to harsh physical punishment, raping of the tribal-peasant women, bonded labour, and others. See, Debal K. SinghaRoy, *Peasant Movements in Post-Colonial India: Dynamics of Mobilization and Identity* (New Delhi: Sage, 2004), p. 54. Due to their institutional power (their alliance with the *mahajans*, or money-lenders, and the police) and close proximity with the land and everyday dealings in grain supplies, accounts, complaints, etc., the jotedars soon became a strong and visible socio-economic presence in the rural areas, and by the implementation of the Bengal Tenancy Act of 1885 (which clipped the powers of the zamindars, or landlords), had already grown into the most powerful and richest agriculturalist class in Bengal. See Ray and Ray, p. 84, pp. 90-96. These shifts brought forth a structure of landed property relations where a few wealthy *zamindars* remained at the top and numerous estates and tenures at the bottom, giving birth to a class of ‘petty proprietors’ and intermediaries. Partha Chatterjee writes in *Bengal 1920-1947: The Land Question*, (Kolkata: K. P. Bagchi, 1984) that ‘The system of land tenure, combined with the distinctiveness to the entry of domestic savings into native industrial enterprises and the destruction of indigenous manufacturing, created the basic economic structure from which emerged this class of rent-receivers, usurers and petty traders totally divorced from, and entirely uninterested in, the conditions of social production. They lived entirely on “revenue”; only the distribution of the surplus concerned them, they had no role in its creation’ (p. 13). This class, as Chatterjee further informs us, contributed to the category of the middle-class, urban, educated ‘bhadrak’ who migrated to the urban centres and became professionals ‘in law, journalists, medicine, teaching and civic and judiciary services’ based on the rent surplus (p. 13). Despite lacking a direct relation to social production, this class came to rule the sphere of cultural production and political power. We have already seen examples of this in Girish, the

large mass of land and labour and the legal and police power, came to rule agricultural production. They were, as Marcus Franda notes, traditional supporters of the ruling Indian Congress Party and its conservative policies on land tenure and redistribution.²⁷⁹ In the Naxalbari area, the jotedar exploitation continued through the ‘ādhīar’ system of share-cropping, existent from the mid-nineteenth century, where peasants were employed as contractual labourers and could be evicted at any time for dispute over shares. In the 1960s, when the United Front Government led by the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (hereafter CPI (M)) came to power, ‘the jotedars and other reactionary elements began to spread the lie that the United Front Government would rob small and medium owners of their land’.²⁸⁰ The landowners started to get rid of the share-croppers fearing that the latter would ask for possession of the land. The atmosphere was such that when, on May 22, 1967, a jotedar, defying court orders, evicted a poor tenant from his land, a few tribal people occupied a tea estate and fought with the armed guards the next day. This incident brought a posse of policemen, and in the resultant fracas a police officer, Sonam Wangdi, died. The following day, a bigger police force went to the area and shot nine tribal people, mainly women and children, who were protesting in a demonstration.²⁸¹ This event infuriated the peasantry which was radicalised and organised for armed struggle by a militant faction of the Left, led by Charu Mazumdar, the CPI (M) leader of the Siliguri Division.

This was not an isolated event. There were a number of armed tribal-peasant uprisings in late-/postcolonial India led by the Left organisations. Just before independence, in the northern districts of Bengal, some peasants rose up against the jotedars for a demand of two-thirds of the crop shares. This is known as the *Tebhaga Movement* (1946-47).²⁸² It was followed by the *Telangana Uprising* (1947) in Andhra

local trader, in Bhabani Bhattacharya’s *So Many Hungers!* and in the post-famine rise of the jotedars into a respected bhadralok class in Chakraborty’s *Ākāler Sandhāne*.

²⁷⁹ Marcus Franda, *Radical Politics*, pp. 152-54. Though the Communist Party played a crucial role in the abolition of landlordism in India, the jotedars continued to hold sway through electoral politics; on this, see Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, *Decolonization in South Asia: The Meanings of Freedom in Post-Independence West Bengal, 1947-1952* (New York: Routledge, 2009), pp. 108-09.

²⁸⁰ Hare Krishna Konar, the Minister for Land and Land Revenue, quoted in Sumanta Banerjee, *India’s Simmering Revolution: the Naxalite Uprising* (London: Zed Books, 1984), p. 86.

²⁸¹ Biplab Dasgupta, *The Naxalite Movement* (Bombay: Allied Publishers, 1974), p. 3; Banerjee, *Simmering*, p. 88.

²⁸² The *bargardars* or share-croppers, who constituted the largest section of peasantry along with the landless agriculturalists or bonded labourers, were also the most exploited by the jotedars. From the mid-1920s, under the instruction of Communist Party of India, the All India Kishan Sabha started

Pradesh, where the peasants launched an armed struggle against the Nizam for a better share of crops.²⁸³ Both these movements were organised by the peasants' and workers' wings of the CPI.²⁸⁴ In the Naxalbari area, Sumanta Banerjee notes that the Communists in North Bengal built up several peasant organisations between 1951 and 1954, radicalising the peasantry to fight the 'petty oppressive acts of the jotedars'; and then organised the tea-plantation workers and rallied them alongside the peasants between 1955 and 1957.²⁸⁵ In the 1958-1962 period, the Naxalbari movement entered a more militant phase under the leadership of Charu Mazumdar. Mazumdar, a forceful orator and popular leader in the Siliguri subdivision of the Darjeeling district where Naxalbari is located, influenced the local leadership and the tribal-peasant population with his powerful reading of Indian state power – arguing that the Indian ruling class was 'semi-feudal and semi-colonial' in nature, and that the ruling party, the Indian Congress, had been captured by the local bourgeoisie as well as the imperialist powers of the United States of America and the Soviet Union.²⁸⁶ Although agriculture was the basis of the Indian economy, Mazumdar showed how Indian peasants, living a life of starvation, hardship, and penury, were victims of multiple layers of structural

radicalising the agrarian workers. The two crop failures of 1938 and 1942 severely affected economic conditions in the villages, and were then followed by the devastating famine of 1943-44 which killed more than three million people, mostly peasants, and which led to the complete collapse of the existing social and economic system in the villages. As the jotedars continued to be unsympathetic and exploit the peasantry for revenue, the sharecroppers, in alliance with the small and middle peasantry, took up arms, demanding two-thirds of the share rather than the age-old one-third. On this, see D. N. Dhanagare, *Peasants Movements in India, 1920-1950* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983), p. 360; SinghaRoy, *Peasant*, pp. 56-57.

²⁸³ Like the *raiayatbari* system in Bengal which produced the class of jotedars, in Hyderabad the *jagirdari* system had long been established. Over the years this system became highly hierarchised and oppressive: *deshmukhs* and *deshpandes* (tax collectors) extorted various illegal taxes from the peasantry, grabbed thousands of acres of land, and reduced many actual cultivators to the status of landless agriculturalists (Dhanagare, p. 378). In a demonstration by the peasants organised by the Communist Party in July 1946, the crowd became angry when 'The *goondas* hired by the landlords fired at the procession' killing the village *sangham* leader. This marked the birth of the struggle. See Dhanagare, *Movements*, p. 194; SinghaRoy, *Peasant*, pp. 73-74. This struggle went on for five years until the Indian armed forces, in alliance with the Nizam, brutally crushed it in 1952. For an account, see P. Sundarayya, *Telangana People's Struggle and Its Lessons* (New Delhi: Foundation Books, 1972), pp. 40-128. In 'Indian Democracy: Long Dead, Now Buried' (1976), Ranajit Guha, as we noted in Chapter One, registers the irony of the fact that bitter repression of peasant resistance to oppressive class rule should have taken place in the context of India's independence from colonial rule and the establishment of formal democracy in the country.

²⁸⁴ There were also sporadic uprisings in Kakdwip and Sundarban in Bengal, in Bihar, Orissa, Kerala, Punjab, and Uttar Pradesh, under the instructions and leadership of the Communist Party. See, P. Eashvaraiah, *The Communist Parties in Power and Agrarian Reforms in India* (New Delhi: Academic Foundation, 1993), pp. 67-120.

²⁸⁵ Banerjee, p. 85.

²⁸⁶ Charu Mazumdar, 'The Declaration of the All India Coordination Committee of Communist Revolutionaries (AICCCR)', in *Charu Mazumdar Collected Works Vol 1*, ed. by Basu Acharya (Kolkata: Radical Impression, 2012), pp. 225-228.

oppression, the most immediate being jotedar rule.²⁸⁷ Motivated by Maoist principles, he spoke particularly of the revolutionary seizure of power and the ‘annihilation of the class enemies’ (i.e. the jotedars and the *mahajans* or money-lenders): ‘The annihilation of the class enemy does not only mean liquidating individuals, but also means liquidating the political, social, and economic authority of the class enemy’.²⁸⁸ These readings not only influenced his fellow leftist intellectuals and the rural population, but also proved to be hugely popular among the urban youth and members of the working classes. As in the villages, there was sustained socio-economic discontent in the urban centres. Post-independence Calcutta saw a teeming population crisis. Because of the number of people who had come to live in the city as refugees after the Partition of Bengal or simply in search of jobs, there was not adequate housing available. A large number of people were living in slums, on railway platforms or on the pavements.²⁸⁹ In addition to wide unemployment, there was an industrial recession in 1966 due to the devaluation of currency. The resultant economic crisis was escalated by the consequent inflation, giving birth to various agitations, strikes, and movements (notably the food movements, tram-fare movements, and others).²⁹⁰ The atmosphere of social and political turmoil was accompanied by the contemporary student agitations against the education system. Students had lost faith in an education system that failed to ensure jobs for them. There were rampant cases of breaking chairs and tables within a university or a college, burning degree certificates on convocations days, etc. In contrast to these social scenes of joblessness, poverty, and squalor, there was a spectacular rise in jobs in the private and public sectors for the well-connected and the upper-class families. Banerjee informs us that despite the housing problems, the price of cement rose to very high levels in the 1960s because of the demand for palatial residences, five-star hotels, garish cinema theatres and nightclubs in the city.²⁹¹ These palpable cases of socio-economic disparity gave Charu Mazumdar’s theories of militant leftism wide popularity. When in early 1969 China transmitted its support for the Naxalbari uprising via Peking Radio and

²⁸⁷ Qtd. in Dasgupta, *Naxalite*, pp. 28-36.

²⁸⁸ Ibid, p. 40.

²⁸⁹ Ibid, p. 35.

²⁹⁰ Banerjee, pp. 32-35; for a more detailed account, see *Food Movement of 1959: Documenting a Turning Point in the History of West Bengal*, ed. by Suranjan Das and Preamansukumar Bandyopadhyay (Kolkata: K.P. Bagchi, 2004); and Sibaji Pratim Basu, ‘The Chronicle of a Forgotten Movement: West Bengal – 1959 Revisited’, in *India: Democracy and Violence*, ed. by Samir Kumar Das (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2015), pp. 213-44 (pp. 235-38).

²⁹¹ Banerjee, p. 34.

criticised the CPI (M) for its conservative and revisionist decisions, Mazumdar and his allies, Kanu Sanyal, Parimal Majumdar, Sushital Roy Chowdhury, Saroj Datta, and others, who had all long been in ideological dispute with the CPI (M), broke away from it and set up another party, the CPI (Marxist-Leninist), with the aim of representing the revolutionary activities 'in practice'.²⁹² This *practice*, Biplab Dasgupta notes, started with the annihilation campaigns, the systematic killing of jotedars and mahajans, and the creation of strategic 'red bases' in the interiors of the villages and forests which were known as 'liberated zones'.²⁹³ In the urban centres, the urban proletariat and student guerrillas were instructed to kill the police, to build up an arsenal, and to vandalise icons and statues of nineteenth- and twentieth-century social reformers such as Raja Rammohan Roy, Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar, Rabindranath Tagore, Mahatma Gandhi, and others, who were identified as capitalists and promoters of the bourgeois cultural establishment.²⁹⁴ But this practice was not supported by all.²⁹⁵ Pradip Basu has shown that the establishment of the Party and the nature of its mission were fiercely debated from the beginning by 'renegade' leaders. Ideological debates continued over Mazumdar's uncompromising approach to land tenure and land ceiling system, the annihilation campaign, the cult of masculinity, and the use of students as guerrilla workers. These struggles within the Party gave birth to a politics of abrupt decisionism and defection, which weakened the movement's force and momentum.²⁹⁶ As the Congress Party came to power in 1969 and in 1971, brutal police and military operations were carried out to kill the Naxalites and to imprison or assassinate the leaders. These counterinsurgency acts, along with problems on trust and loyalty, shattered the movement's base and paved the ground for the end of the historic Naxalbari movement.²⁹⁷

²⁹² Dasgupta, p. 32.

²⁹³ Ibid, pp. 40-41.

²⁹⁴ Banerjee, pp. 176-86.

²⁹⁵ Sushital Roy Chowdhury published his criticisms in the essays 'Combat Left Adventurism' and 'On Student-Youth Movement'. Saroj Datta replied to them variously in 'On Subhash Bose' and 'In Defence of Iconoclasm'. Charu Mazumdar expressed his wholehearted support for vandalism: 'The colonial education system of our country teaches us to hate our country and the common people [...] everyone believing in revolutionary ideology and the Thought of Mao Tse Tung should regard it as his sacred responsibility to create hatred against the educational system. If therefore, out of hatred for the system, the students break chairs and tables or burn records, no revolutionary has any right to discourage them.' Quoted in Banerjee, p. 181. For an overview, see Dasgupta 68-78; Banerjee pp. 50-53, pp. 178-84.

²⁹⁶ Pradip Basu, *Towards Naxalbari (1953-1967): An Account of Inner-Party Ideological Struggle* (Kolkata: Progressive Publishers, 2000), p. 7, p. 18.

²⁹⁷ Though the Naxalbari movement in Bengal was over in 1972, Maoist movements came back in the late 1990s and soon gained strong footing in the states of Andhra Pradesh, Jharkhand, Bihar, and Orissa.

In popular media, solidly owned by the bourgeoisie, this final urban phase of the movement, such as the vandalistic and violent acts, was branded as the politics of Naxalism and caricatured. Biplab Dasgupta notes that the Naxalbari movement received a negative ‘enthusiastic response’ in the press. Most newspapers or editorials would condemn these activities as ‘misguided acts’ of some romantic brilliant and revolutionary youths who were reacting against the parliamentarianism of their parent party.²⁹⁸ He shows, by giving examples from various contemporary dailies, how ‘the press would even go to the extent of inventing stories to keep [negative] popular interest alive in the Naxalites’.²⁹⁹ For him, the link with the Chinese Cultural Revolution, just after China’s War with India, ‘made stimulating reading’, gathering popular bias against the Naxalites. In view of the anti-communist tradition of the Indian press, the sensationalised reports were meant to scare the uncommitted and the initiated and to consolidate anti-communist opinions across the nation. Shatarupa Sengupta, in a recent study, tells us that the leading newspaper in Bengal, *Anandabazar Patrika*, published a series of articles that defined the movement as anarchic and linked it with CPI (M) to discredit the United Front government.³⁰⁰ But this kind of negative representation was not only manufactured by the bourgeois-established media; it was also engineered by the Naxalbari mouthpieces such as *Deshabrati*, *Liberation*, and *Frontier*. Dasgupta notes that in order to highlight and condemn the ideological struggles within the Left parties and establish a mass basis for the newly formed CPI (M-L), *Liberation* would often eulogise how the Party’s work in rural areas was enthusiastically supported by the agriculturalists. When the Naxalbari violence was at its peak, *Liberation* repeatedly published and glorified the gruesome acts of murder by the Naxalbari cadres.³⁰¹ For Shatarupa Sengupta, these

There have been multiple counter-insurgencies from the state and state-sponsored bodies. For an overview, see *The Naxal Movement: Causes, Linkages, Policy Options*, ed. by P. V. Ramana (Delhi: Pearson Longman, 2008); *Maoism in India: Reincarnation of Ultra-Left Wing Radicalism in the Twentieth-Century*, ed. by Bidyut Chakrabarty and Rajat Kumar Kujur (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010); *India and Counterinsurgency: Lessons Learned*, ed. by Sumit Ganguly and David P. Fidler (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009); and Arundhati Roy, *Walking with the Comrades* (New Delhi: Penguin, 2011).

²⁹⁸ Dasgupta, p. 227.

²⁹⁹ Ibid, p. 227.

³⁰⁰ Shatarupa Sengupta, ‘Media Representations of the Naxalite Movement, 1967-1972’, in *Discourses on Naxalite Movement (1967-2009): Insights into Radical Left Politics*, ed. by Pradip Basu (Kolkata: Setu Prakashani, 2010), p. 82.

³⁰¹ For instance, in one issue (August 1969) they write: ‘People expressed their hatred for this class enemy by painting slogans with his blood’; in another (September, 1969): ‘I hit the agent on the head and killed him with one stroke. But it did not seem enough, so the peasants cut him into three pieces and one of them even drove his knife deep into the belly of the dead landlord’, and so on. See Dasgupta, pp. 45-46.

acts created a ‘Rashomon effect’. Almost all the newspapers were highlighting the same acts of violence but for different ideological reasons, thus promoting the Naxalite figure as terroristic and inhuman. Sengupta concludes, ‘It was impossible for people to excavate the truth from the layers of the dominant images and ideologies. The media failed to address these contradictory pictures and the conditions responsible for the crisis’.³⁰²

This *kind* of representation remained dominant in the literary writings as well. Writing mainly from metropolitan locations, writers who hardly had any knowledge of the socio-economic problems in the peripheries of Bengal, or writers who had themselves been Naxalites in their early years but had abandoned the movement and were writing now in reaction to it, portrayed a predominantly negative or confusing picture of the movement. As Nirmal Ghosh, one of the first to write about this movement, notes in *Naxalbarir Andolon o Bangla Sahitya* (1981), that the Naxalite in some of the popular novels appears variously as a terrorist, an anarchist, or a mentally challenged human being: ‘In most of the writers, there is a strong tendency either to condemn the Naxalbari politics or to provoke the conservative Bengali sentiment in order to identify the Naxalites as bloodsucking monsters.’³⁰³ He lists numerous novels and short stories in this context, by such noted writers as Samaresh Majumdar, Samaresh Basu, Sunil Gangyopadhyay Ashim Ray, and others, but finds only Mahasweta Devi, and, to some extent, Gunamay Manna and Swarna Mitra, interested in exploring larger issues of social and economic inequality in the rural and urban areas of Bengal. Another critic, Phatik Chand Ghosh, notes in a recent work (2012) that the movement created a huge interest in political fiction writing in the Bengali literary sphere, but there was hardly any critical engagement with the serious issues plaguing the rural and urban societies in postcolonial India.³⁰⁴ Most Naxalbari

³⁰² Sengupta, *Discourses*, p. 87.

³⁰³ Nirmal Ghosh, *Naxalbarir Andolon o Bangla Sahitya* [*The Naxalbari Movement and Bengali Literature*] (Kolkata: Karuna Prakashani, 1981), p. 221. My translation. This is a noted critical survey of Bengali Naxalite fiction in the 1970s – the body of work with which I am primarily engaged in this chapter. For readers interested in Bengali Naxalite literature, these survey works are helpful: *Naxalbari and After: A Frontier Anthology*, ed. by Samar Sen, Debabrata Panda, and Asish Lahiri, 2 vols (Kolkata: Kathasilpi, 1978); *Naxal Andoler Golpo* [*Short Stories of the Naxal Movement*], ed. by Bijit Ghosh (Kolkata: Punascha, 1999); Phatik Chandra Ghosh, *Bidroher Srote Ekti Taranga: Naxalbari Parba o Bangla Kabita* [*A Wave in the Tides of Revolt: The Naxalbari Movement and Bengali Poetry*] (Kolkata: Samikkha Prakashan, 2004); Sumanta Banerjee, *Thema Book of Naxalite Poetry* (Kolkata: Thema, 2009); *Red on Silver: Naxalites in Cinema*, ed. by Pradip Basu (Kolkata: Setu Prakashani, 2012).

³⁰⁴ Phatik Chandra Ghosh, *Naxal Andolan or Bangla Kathasahitya* [*Naxalbari Movement and the Bengali Novel*] (Kolkata: Bangiya Sahitya Sangsad, 2012), p. 42. It is worth noting that in comparison

fiction is distorted, purposeful, sensationalised and commercialised.³⁰⁵ The main reason for this is the middle-class location of the writers, who, as Ghosh notes, openly denounced the acts of annihilation by the Naxalites but kept silent about the massive state-sponsored terrorism. He also thinks that the urban Naxalites, who had relatively less knowledge of the urgent socio-economic issues in the rural areas, did not reach out to the writers.³⁰⁶

I agree with Ghosh's criticism of the middle-class writers' political silence and sensationalised rendering of the movement, which Mahasweta Devi has consistently lampooned in her works. However, I think both Nirmal Ghosh and Phatik Chand Ghosh are more interested in what these writers say in their content than how they say them. A cursory reading of the Naxalite novels tells us that the writers have from the very beginning experimented with style and exploited several formal modes, devices, and genres. There is the Bildungsroman mode in which an urban or rural youth who witnesses everyday socio-economic and physical violence decides to join the movement and dies of state terror, or a disillusioned youth who realises the futility of such a movement but cannot give up hope on revolutionary politics.³⁰⁷ There is also the action-adventure mode where an urban youth goes to a village and joins the ranks

to the richness and depth of Naxalite creative literature, critical work on this field is lacking and unorganised. Phatik Chand Ghosh also notes this in his 2012 book *Bengali Novel*, and tells his readers to take his book not as an informed literary-textual engagement, but as a critical survey of Naxalite fiction in the last forty years. Apart from these critical contributions by the Ghoshes which are unfortunately not translated into English, one can consult these Bengali works for a wider context: *Sottor Doshok* [*The Seventies*], ed. by Anil Acharya (Kolkata: Anustup, 1980); Amar Bhattacharya, *Naxalbari Andoloner Pramanyo Tathyo Sankyolon* [*Edition on the Documents of the Naxalbari Movement*] (Kolkata: Naya Istehar, 1998); *Sei Doshok* [*That Decade*], ed. by Pulakesh Mandol and Jaya Mitra, (Kolkata: Pyapirus, 1994); Saroj Bandyopadhyay, *Bangla Upanyas: Dwandwik Dwarpan* [*Bengali Novel: The Dialectical Mirror*] (Kolkata: Paschimbango Bangla Akademi, 1996). There is not much work on this field in English. Two essays about the recent Naxalite novels of Jhumpa Lahiri and Neel Mukherjee may be helpful: Nina Martyris, 'The Naxal Novel', *Dissent Magazine*, Fall 2014 <<https://www.dissentmagazine.org/article/the-naxal-novel>> [accessed 14 January, 2017]; and Pavan Kumar Malreddy, 'Solidarity, Suffering and 'Divine Violence': Fictions of the Naxalite Insurgency', in *South-Asian Fictions in English: Contemporary Transformations*, ed. by Alex Tickell (London: Palgrave, 2016), pp. 217-33.

³⁰⁵ Ghosh, *Bengali Novel*, pp. 23-24.

³⁰⁶ He writes, 'From the very beginning, the Naxalites have virulently attacked the "opportunistic and safe" locations of middle class writers, wounded them in many of their theoretical writings and political speeches, termed every writer who imitated a middle class writer a cultural enemy, and alienated each and every one whosoever did not conform to the political agenda of the Naxalites', p. 24.

³⁰⁷ See these works: Swarno Mitra *Gramey Chalo* [*Let's March to the Village*] (Murshidabad: People's Book Agency, 1972); Shirshendu Mukhopadhyay, *Sheola* [*Moss*] (Kolkata: Ananda, 1977); Gunamay Manna, *Shalboni* [*Shalboni*] (Kolkata: Aruna Prakashani, 1978); Samaresh Majumdar, *Kalbela* [*The Ominous Hour*] (Kolkata: Ananda, 1983); Sandipan Chattopadhyay, *Ami o Banabihari* [*Banabihari and I*] (Kolkata: Ajkaal, 2000).

of revolutionary leaders to carry out bloody annihilation campaigns;³⁰⁸ or where a repentant returnee comes back from a torturous life in prison to his old town only to find that nothing has changed, and turns into either a solitary figure and a madman, or a diseased and infected wretch slowly advancing to death.³⁰⁹ The use of these different modes and devices challenges Ghosh's suggestion that this creative body of literature is homogeneous and written solely to entertain the reading public and instruct them about the tragic consequences of romantic idealism. Instead, I believe that this literature may also be seen to explore the question of the crisis of representation itself – how to respond to the various puzzling questions of why the movement broke out, why students were angry and went on to 'annihilate' the police, how ideological struggles within the Party influenced them, etc. A study of form and mode, as I will show below, helps us understand how an author engages with an event, what issues are explored, highlighted, and condemned, and what was left out and for what reasons. Instead of criticizing the use of distorted and fragmentary formal strategies and narratives, as Phatik Ghosh does, it is more important to ask how they have laid out their narrative. This is a crucial question as it leads us to the corollary question of the politics of fiction writing itself. Such politics does not receive enough attention in these critical writings on the Naxalite creative literature; thus, despite its admirable coverage and commentary, the works of the two Ghoshes seem to suggest that Naxalbari fiction is not artistically successful as fiction. This is almost the same kind of criticism we noted in C. Paul Varughese's attack on Bhabani Bhattacharya's famine work. As Partha Pratim Bandyopadhyay sums up cogently for us:

The writings based on the Naxalbari events or characters could not in many cases stand the test of time because they were written mainly from the perspective of direct engagement with the events or from the intimate life histories of the insurgents. From these vantage points, it was impossible for the writers to render artistic objectivity to the Movement. And those who saw it from outside, or read about it, attempted to give self-styled imaginary meanings to the event. As a result, the stories and the novels could hardly become good art.³¹⁰

³⁰⁸ Most notably in Shankar Basu, *Komunis [Communist]* (Kolkata: Barnona, 1974); Krishna Chakraborty, *Chorabali [Quicksand]* (Kolkata: Chirayat, 1981); Bani Basu, *Antarghat [Sabotage]* (Kolkata: Ananda, 1989); Shyamal Gangyopadhyay, *Ekada Ghatak [Once a Killer]* (Kolkata: Biswabani, 1994).

³⁰⁹ For instance, Mukhopadhyay, *Sheola*; and Samaresh Basu, *Mahakaler Rather Ghora [The Pegasus of Infinite Time]* (Kolkata: Ananda, 1977).

³¹⁰ Partha Pratim Bandyopadhyay, *Postmodern Bhabna o Onyanyo (Naxal Andolon: Golpo Upanyaser Probonota: Du Ekti Mantyobyo) [The Postmodern Thoughts and Others [The Naxalite Movement: Stories and Novels: One or Two Things]]* (Kolkata: Radical Impression, 1986), p. 67.

Rather than evaluating what a ‘good’ or a ‘bad’ art is, in this chapter I will argue that a writer’s adoption of a particular mode is a politically mediated act. I choose here the works of Mahasweta Devi and Nabarun Bhattacharya because most of the popular and acclaimed Naxalite novels (mentioned in the footnotes above) – and here I agree with the Ghoshes – are prejudiced in their indifference, or even hostility, to the Naxalite event, rather than holistically exploring the issues and historically situating the plight of the peasants and the urban poor. Their modal preferences appear to be predominantly influenced by their ideological values which appear at times to be pro-establishment and at other times to be politically confusing. Devi in two of her Naxalite novels, *Mother of 1084* (1974) and *Operation? – Bashai Tudu* (1978), predominantly uses a quest mode, which allows her to use a protagonist, who has little knowledge about Naxalism or is not ideologically committed to it, to explore what Naxalism stands for. What is particularly striking about her works is the way she uses the categories of gender and caste to explore the links between patriarchy, bourgeois establishment and postcolonial consumerism in 1960s Calcutta, the casteist and corrupt nature of Left politics in postcolonial rural Bengal, and the logic behind an armed peasant struggle. The quest mode here becomes the vehicle of a critical social-scientific investigation into the politics of Naxalism. The mode also undermines its rational-analytical power through the use of fractured times and memory, and of surreal and fantastic elements, which, I will argue, suggest the difficulty of writing a linear narrative of the movement and point at the task of a writer’s *giving voice* to the voiceless. In Nabarun Bhattacharya’s novels, *Harbart* (1994) and *Kāngāl Mālshāt* (2003; *Warcry of the Beggars*), the narrative is structured as an urban fantasy. This mode, produced through a stylistic use of supernatural elements and the blurring of the rational and the non-rational in order to understand the conjunctural nature of urban space and modernity, allows a critical rendering of middle-class complacency and consumerism, of the conservative politics of the Left, and of the revival and implementation of Naxalite tactics and politics by the urban poor. In his article ‘The Current of Critical Irrealism’, Michael Löwy³¹¹ holds that writers from E. T. A. Hoffmann to Kafka and Beckett have complicated the realist form by importing within

³¹¹ Michael Löwy, ‘The Current of Critical Irrealism: “A Moonlit Enchanted Night”’, in *Adventures in Realism*, ed. by Matthew Beaumont (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), pp. 193-206.

a narrative of sequential rational plot development elements of the supernatural, the spectral, and the ghostly, which are consciously used as socio-textual responses to capitalist modernity in the European metropolises. For Löwy, ‘irreal’ does not mean ‘unreal’ or ‘anti-real’. Irrealism is an extension of realism where writers using the form to document social reality do not conform to the standard definition of realism, ‘the rules of representing the reality as it is’.³¹² Building on Lukács’ reading of critical realism (in *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism*), Löwy posits that the term irreal could be expanded to many genres including dystopian, utopian, oneiric, and fairytale narratives. But he also alerts us to the fact that many of these genres, such as the fairytale, do not necessarily harbour a critique and in most cases are conservative in nature. He thus speaks of a critical irrealism where critique is not to be understood ‘as relating to a rational argument, a systematic opposition, or an explicit discourse; more often, in irrealist art, it takes the form of protest, outrage, disgust, anxiety, or *angst*’.³¹³ In both Devi and Bhattacharya, we encounter rage against state-sponsored violence and civil society’s numb responses, against the consumerist logic of urban development and gentrification, and against the uprooting of the poor from urban spaces. They use the dialectic of rational-non-rational to critique bourgeois establishment politics as well as bourgeois media and realist discourses. I will show below how the quest and urban fantastic modes are used to make a careful, committed, and layered study of the specific historical conjuncture of the Naxalbari movement and of its aftermath.

Mahasweta Devi’s Naxalite Novels and the Quest Mode

Mahasweta Devi (1926-2016) is a complex writer, not only because of her narrative experimentations but also because of the number of terrains she traverses in addition to that of a fiction writer: a lifelong activist for women and tribal rights, a documenter of oral history, a pamphleteer, and a journalist. Much has already been said of this skill and virtuosity,³¹⁴ but their impact on her fiction writing has still not been

³¹² Ibid, p. 191.

³¹³ Ibid, p. 196; emphasis in original.

³¹⁴ See for instance, Mahasweta Devi, ‘The Author in Conversation’ in *Imaginary Maps: Three Stories by Mahasweta Devi*, trans. by Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak (London: Routledge, 1995), pp. ix-xxii; *Dust on the Road: The Activist Writings of Mahasweta Devi*, ed. by Maitreyi Ghatak (Kolkata: Seagull, 1997); Malini Bhattacharya, ‘Mahasweta Devi: Activist and Writer’, *Economic and Political Weekly*, 32.19 (1997), 1003-04.

adequately attended to. This section will try to address this social and activist element in her writing through a reading of the irrealist mode in her Naxalite novels. The first thing that strikes us about Devi's Naxalite novels is that both are one-day narratives. Also, the focal characters of the novels, Brati and Bashai, are in fact absent throughout (dead or disappeared), and it is through the protagonists' (Sujata's and Kali's) exploring the reasons of absence that they come back to life. *Mother of 1084*³¹⁵ is set on the second death anniversary, which is also the twenty-second birthday, of Brati Chatterjee, Sujata Chatterjee's son and a Naxalite youth killed by the police and reduced to an identification number of 1084. The novel revolves around Sujata's search for answers for Brati's murder, the search being shown through the exploration of Sujata's traumatised psyche and her meetings with other women affected by the movement – Somu's mother (Somu being Brati's friend and a fellow revolutionary) and Nandini, Brati's beloved and comrade in arms. These aspects allow Devi to explore the patriarchal and consumerist nature of postcolonial urban societies. *Operation? Bashai Tudu*³¹⁶ is about Kali Santra's journey in the middle of Charsha forest, West Bengal, on a day in July 1977 to caution Bashai about his police warrant. Kali is a loyal and veteran CPI (M) cadre who has deep sympathy for Bashai, a Santhal landless labourer who was also a member of the Party but has turned renegade for the Party's long silence on caste issues and on minimum wage for agricultural workers. Through Kali's memories during the journey, we get to know that Bashai has killed four jotedars in the region and has also been killed four times by the police and the army. On each occasion, his corpse was identified either by Kali or by Bashai's fellow labourers, but somehow something was wrong and Bashai has continued to come back from death, which has caused the local party members (who are either jotedars or upper-caste people) and the police to panic about Bashai's superhuman abilities. Kali has been sent again to negotiate with him, and it is through his memories of past visits and their dialogues that Devi portrays the caste-based Left politics, the jotedar and police violence, and the subaltern resistance in rural societies and peripheries of Bengal.

³¹⁵ *Mother of 1084* was published as *Hajar Churashir Maa* (Kolkata: Karuna Prakashani, 1974) and translated into English by Samik Bandyopadhyay in 1996 (Kolkata: Seagull). All quotations are taken from the translated edition.

³¹⁶ *Operation? – Bashai Tudu* was published in *Agnigarbha* which also included the short story 'Draupadi'. Both works were translated (respectively by Samik Bandyopadhyay and by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak) and published into a book, *Bashai Tudu*, edited by Samik Bandyopadhyay (Kolkata: Thema, 1990). All quotations are taken from this edition.

Irrealism in the narratives then emerges mainly through the element of the non-death of the urban Naxalite/rural insurgent figure. But Devi could have also used a multiple-day narrative for the same end. My contention here is that Devi uses the one-day narrative to suggest that it is possible to engage with and analyse complex political and economic phenomena, and demystify the repressive and ideological apparatuses at work, by exploring the activities of a single day. Through the expansive use of time in a one-day narrative, a writer is able to historicise the event and forge a totality of social relations in the bourgeois/jotedar domination and the Naxalite/tribal resistance. Using one-day narratives to engage with broader historical aspects is, of course, nothing new; James Joyce made a compelling demonstration with *Ulysses*.³¹⁷ Through a powerful use of memory, dialogues, monologues, stream-of-consciousness techniques, mythological-structural qualities, and intertextual references, Joyce explored the deeper meanings of Jewish history, Irish nationalism, mourning and melancholia, the cultural and linguistic differences between Britain and Ireland, the capitalist consumerist overhaul of colonial Ireland, etc., all within the conversations of an otherwise ordinary day, 16 June, 1904. Before Devi, Indian writers such as Mulk Raj Anand, Satinath Bhaduri, and Gopal Halder have used this format.³¹⁸ But what is striking about Devi's use is setting the one-day time frame for a quest narrative where Sujata and Kali are to find out as much about Brati, Bashai, their politics and current society as about themselves. These quests, as I will argue later, are not successful which suggests the difficult nature of life and living in the periphery as well as the complex task of literary representation of the peripheral postcolonial subject by the outsider-author. Devi builds these failed quests through a number of experimentations in the narratives and through a deep sense of attachment to historical reality. As one-day narratives, the main experiment lies in the use of time and temporality. There is a linear development of plot (the activities of the day) which is juxtaposed with a non-linear time of action (historical time). In order to build this dialectic of linearity and non-linearity, Devi uses the resources of dream, dialogue, and memory, which both affectively politicise Sujata and critically educate Kali, and allow her narrator to enter

³¹⁷ See James Joyce, *Ulysses* (London: Penguin, 2000).

³¹⁸ See Mulk Raj Anand, *Untouchable* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1935); Satinath Bhaduri, *Jagari* (Kolkata: Bengal Publishers, 1945), trans. as *The Vigil* by Lila Roy (Bombay: Asia Publishing, 1963); Gopal Halder, *Tridiba* [*Three Days Trilogy*] in *Gopal Halder Rochonasomogro* 3 vols [*The Complete Works of Gopal Halder* 3 vols], ed. by Rajib Niyogi, vol I (Kolkata: A Mukherjee and Co., 1949), pp. 1-524.

and deploy scathing criticism of the state, the middle class, and civil society. The one-day narratorial form of the novel becomes a political ploy and a medium of social investigation and justice. This section will understand her use of the quest mode and her critical irrationalism through a discussion of four elements – dream, memory, narratorial participation, and the non-death of the insurgent.

Linear Plot and Non-Linear Action Time: Dream, Dialogue, and Memory

Mother begins with a section titled ‘Morning’. Sujata’s sleep is broken by an oft-recurring dream of her labour pain during Brati’s birth. The narration mixes past with present to suggest the intense nature of pain and to draw our attention to Brati:

In her dreams Sujata was back on a morning twenty-two years ago. She often went back to that morning. She found herself packing her bag: towel, blouse, sari, toothbrush, soap. Sujata is fifty-three now. In her dreams she sees a Sujata at thirty-one, busy packing her bag. A Sujata still young, heavy with the child she bore in her womb, packed her bag carefully item by item as she prepared to bring Brati into this world. That Sujata’s face twisted with pain again and again, she clamped her teeth on her lips to check the cry, the Sujata of the dreams waiting for Brati to be born.³¹⁹

Sujata has dreamt this episode so many times that she can distinctly remember all the nitty-gritty of it. The ensuing narration does not divulge the reason of the recurrence, but does reveal her family’s indifference to her demands and needs in these difficult periods. But not the entire narration is in the past. The narrator uses a present tense to tell us Sujata’s age. This is useful because we get to understand the recurrent nature of the dream through the present indefinite use of tense and we are informed that Brati was born twenty-two years ago. This information is important because today, we are told later, is Brati’s birthday, hinting at a link between the narration of pain in labour and the description of her family’s cold attitude. The incompatibility, or rather, the serious tone of the narration (as against the supposed celebratory mood for the auspicious day) becomes clear as soon as we are told that Brati is dead. Sujata did not know what he was killed for, and noticed that his family helped the police erase all data from public notice, all objects that memorialise Brati from public view: ‘There

³¹⁹ Devi, *Mother*, p. 1.

were so many questions before his death, and so many after. Question marks. Rows and endless rows of question marks'.³²⁰ Devi's narrator does not tell us right away that two years have passed and Sujata has come to see through more clearly the hypocrisy of her family, of economic exhibitionism and moral degradation, and the criminality in shutting a voice that posed uncomfortable questions to them. The narrator slowly develops her character, sometimes through a deep-time narration where a past narration explores further events in the past to establish coherence between events, or through sudden time shifts to the narratorial present within a longer flashback. These techniques push the narration further away in deep-time; for instance, Sujata's thoughts about her family are broken by a telephone call, which in turn reminds her of the telephone call two years ago from a morgue called Kantapukur reporting Brati's death. This deep-time narration suggests that the lives of Sujata and Brati are interlinked. Brati may be dead, but Sujata brings him back every day through her dreams, thoughts, and memories, in order to understand why he died, what his words meant on the day he was killed, what he was like not as a son but as a political human being, and finally and fundamentally why she failed to understand him.

Brati was soft-hearted, fearful, and imaginative, 'haunted by fears, the fears that haunt an imaginative child': 'A funeral procession in the night shouting "Haribol!" was frightening, the street performer masquerading as a bandit was frightening. But then he outgrew all his fears'.³²¹ He loved to read poems about death (in a line or two, Brati is already an adolescent). Sujata can still see him sitting on the window sill and reading poetry, which is then followed by the information that he considers his father a class enemy – this is clearly Brati in his early college days. So, in a few lines Devi's narrator develops Brati's character as a sensitive, strong, and politically conscious human being. It is, however, not clear whether the narrator is divulging this information objectively or whether this is all part of Sujata's dreams: 'When Sujata saw Brati in her dreams these days, a part of her mind would insist it was just a dream. Brati did not exist. It was just a dream. The other part of the mind went on insisting that it was not a dream, it was real'.³²² This technique allows Devi to create the semblance of transparent narration. If, indeed, we consider that it is

³²⁰ Ibid, p. 12.

³²¹ Ibid, p. 13.

³²² Ibid, p. 14.

Sujata's dreams that kicks off the narration, it could be argued that the entire narration is an extended dream event. Dream and reality become mixed. But note that Devi does not use dream to alter the course of reality. Dreams, memories, and recollections help her explore Brati's character and engage sympathetically with the Naxalbari movement. The diegetic narrator sometimes pluralises the consciousness and speaks of how a movement for social and economic equality was brutally murdered by the city's police, bourgeois middle class, and civil society; how these young people who sacrificed their lives for a cause were murdered with impunity: 'They [Brati and his friends] were all sentenced to death. Anybody was permitted to kill them. People in all the parties, people of all creeds had the unlimited, democratic right to kill these young men who had rejected the parties of the establishment'.³²³ From this sarcastic narration, the narrator then places vital political arguments, 'The questions remained: Was Brati's death futile? Did his death stand for a massive NO'.³²⁴ The moment we begin to think it is the narrator asking these questions, we are told that it is Sujata who is thinking about all these while looking at the things in Brati's room. Thus, the suggestion here is that Sujata has begun to take note of the documents in Brati's room, to work hard to recollect what Brati said and what they meant, to uncover the deeper meanings, and to politicise herself; that she has been thinking all these weeks and months about Brati, and trying to put together bits and pieces to find answers when the police and her family had closed the case file. In these psychological investigations, dreams are the reflections of her daily work. It is in dreams that she understands the logic behind Brati's political decisions and the hypocrisy of bourgeois life, that she should have stopped him from visiting his friends on that fateful night: 'In her dream, Sujata knew that Brati would not go to Ronu's house, he would go to warn Somu and his group. In her dreams yearned to rush out and drag Brati back by the hand. She yearned to scream out – Brati, come back!'.³²⁵ Dreams thus appear to be not only a useful ploy to enter the main narration, but also a medium through which Sujata's psychological journey and her affective politicisation are executed. In the quote above, it is not only Brati's lies that Sujata spots, but also her own intense love for Brati and her passionate desire to correct her faults, to bring Brati back to life. Her motherly self, her sensitivity, and her emotions are not sacrificed by Devi for the

³²³ Ibid, pp. 19-20.

³²⁴ Ibid, p. 20.

³²⁵ Ibid, p. 53.

development of her political self. It is after all a novel about a mother and the loss of her child to state violence. As the narrator says, ‘Who is Sujata? Only a mother. Who are those hundreds of thousands whose hearts, even now, are being gnawed by questions? Only mothers’.³²⁶

Contrary to the narration of the Brati episodes, Sujata’s family is described in a fairly linear fashion. The descriptions here mark the patriarchal-consumerist nature of her family and her growing politicisation. As an upper-middle class woman whose husband is an established chartered accountant and whose daughters are married or engaged to top-level salaried executives or businessmen settled abroad, Sujata’s job in the family has been to remain silent and do her work as a dutiful wife and mother: ‘She was not one of those radicals, the independent woman conscious of her rights [...] Sujata was quiet, taciturn and old fashioned’.³²⁷ But she was always self-sufficient as the childbirth episode has suggested. Her mother-in-law never went with her because she disliked Sujata’s pregnancies (her husband died after Dibyanath, her only son and Sujata’s husband, was born), and Dibyanath never accompanied her because he found it unmanly. At the same time, Devi’s narrator tells us: ‘But he noticed things, he noticed Sujata, he had to be sure that Sujata was fit enough to bear a child again’.³²⁸ Here is a glimpse into the gendered nature of bourgeois family where women are considered a medium for an entire praxis of social reproduction. Sujata knows that Dibyanath has extra-marital affairs, but his mother indulges it: ‘For her it was a mark of her son’s virility; her son was no henpecked husband’.³²⁹ What these glimpses suggest is that gender is not about sexual difference. The mother-in-law’s thoughts are an indication of her absorption of the deeply sexist elements in patriarchal societies. Education and urbanity do not necessarily bring rational thinking. Indeed, the qualities and values one considers rational, progressive, and modern more often than not betray deeply-rooted conservative ideologies. Pointing these out is understood as a crime in a consumerist bourgeois society, like when the diegetic narrator says: ‘If Brati drank like Jyoti, if he could go about drunk like Neepa’s husband, if he could flirt with the slip of a typist the way Brati’s father did [...] then they could have accepted Brati as

³²⁶ Ibid, p. 51.

³²⁷ Ibid, p. 46.

³²⁸ Ibid, p. 3.

³²⁹ Ibid, p. 31.

one of them'.³³⁰ These thoughts and questions are consolidated in the fourth and final section of the novel, 'Evening'. The today of the narrative, that is Brati's birth and death anniversary, is also the day of the engagement party of Tuli, Sujata's youngest daughter. Devi gives here a vignette of the established bourgeois upper- and middle-class life in Kolkata in the 1960s: Sujata's eldest daughter, Neepa flirting with her brother-in-law, Balai; Tuli's fiancé, Tony Kapadia talking about the profits he has made by selling Indian handicrafts in Sweden; and her friends being involved in debauchery, drinking, and discussion of social and economic development in India. Through these sharp pictures full of irony and bitter sarcasm, Devi shows how *bhadrata* (decency) in this postcolonial urban society means playing the games of consumerist capitalism, where the gendered role means either (for a distancing, unassimilated woman like Sujata) meeting the entire spectrum of gendered social reproduction (child bearing, child rearing, domestic labour, etc.), or (for assimilated women serving patriarchal needs and desires) allowing the female body to be available for objectification. 'Auteurs' Mrinal Sen and Satyajit Ray have powerfully captured these aspects in their Calcutta films.³³¹ As in the films, the objectification of women's bodies and their sexuality, the commodification of culture, the unending accumulation of material wealth, and the strict adoption of political conservatism are considered the standard aspirations for the upper-middle-class family here. Although patriarchal nature is tokenised through Dibyanath (in his powerful presence in both family and professional circles), it is mainly through the rendering of social and cultural life of Sujata's family and neighbours that Devi implies a deep nexus between patriarchy, family, and gendered roles. In such gendered social structure, Sujata's eldest daughter's public humiliation of her husband as impotent and her glorified justifications for her extra-marital affair with her brother-in-law, or Tuli's marriage to a businessman who is settled abroad, appears as much a pattern of patriarchal designs as Dibyanath's dominance in the family. When, without informing Sujata, Tuli invites Saroj Pal, the inspector who killed Brati, to her engagement party, Sujata cannot hold her fury any longer; she cries out loud with rage and falls unconscious to the floor. The novel ends here.

³³⁰ Ibid, p. 31.

³³¹ See the 'Calcutta trilogies' of Satyajit Ray and Mrinal Sen.

Sujata's screaming could be read as an act of political agency. We have noted that she has already politicised herself, and distanced herself from her family and become silent. Her silence has often made her family members think that she is an 'unnatural' mother, an 'odd' wife who does not mourn her son. But we are told that the day her family attempted to dispose of Brati's objects and invited Saroj Pal to officially separate their relations from Brati, they no longer mattered, or even existed, for her. Devi's narration here is dramatic but adequate to represent the depth of her hatred for them: 'The way he [Dibyanath] had behaved that day [...] it] had burst upon her with explosive force. Like one of those massive meteors crashing upon the ancient world billions of years ago. Like one of those explosions that broke up the solid mass of the earth into continents separated by the oceans.'³³² This immense depth of hatred only escalated and turned into rage with Pal's visits. Pal is introduced as a voice in the beginning who asks the family to come to Kantapukur and identify Brati. There is nothing to identify. Brati's mutilated body and thrashed face, and Pal's order that his body cannot be taken home, serve to justify the rage against Pal's character. Later when he visits the family, Sujata is shocked to see him behaving like a perfect gentleman: 'suave, sophisticated, handsome, the smile of a Prince Charming, a flawless intonation, Yes Mr Chatterjee, I quite assure you [...] Mrs Chatterjee, I understand, I too have a mother'.³³³ Sujata cannot believe the contrasting nature of his character: he is not an illiterate, bloodthirsty, rustic, unkempt, dirty human, but an educated, urban elite, sophisticated individual. Again, the sarcasm and bitterness are too clear in the narration where Pal refers to the fact that he also has a mother, and we understand through Devi's narration that he has hardly any idea what pain a mother goes through for the loss of an offspring. Devi also uses a juxtaposition of oppositional voices to build Pal's character for the context. 'Saroj Pal. Saroj Pal. No pardon for You. Empty, empty threat. For two years Saroj Pal has conducted "this massive investigation, search, and punitive operation. His supreme efficiency and courage has been [...]"'.³³⁴ The first part is clearly an allusion to the Naxalite graffiti on cruel inspectors, while the second part has a journalistic voice, reminiscent of the bourgeois media that promoted and celebrated the representatives of the repressive machineries of the state. Through this technique, Devi's narrator extracts sympathy from us for the

³³² Devi, *Mother*, p. 8.

³³³ Ibid, p. 29.

³³⁴ Ibid, p. 28.

Naxalite cause and manages to add more depth to Sujata's hatred for this character. Thus, when Sujata sees Pal invited to her house and enjoying a life of comfort after so many killings, her pain and fury burst open in the form of her scream. The scream shatters the limits of toleration, her silences, and bursts open the deep rage within her – a tremendous energy to defy and resist the current culture of state violence and patriarchal injunctions, of consumerism and moral degradation. It is a declaration that she will not be co-opted any longer into this bourgeois project of the commodification of body and soul; she will resist both the repressive and ideological powers of the gendered social reproduction. In a recent reading of the novel, Srila Roy writes, 'At the end of the novel, Sujata brings the revolutionary cause into the heart of the domestic sphere in her singular act of patriarchal defiance; an act that powerfully weds the personal with the political in the revolutionary imaginary'.³³⁵

However, the act should not be understood only as a result of Sujata's psychological explorations. The platform for this act is also built through her dialogues with other women affected by the movement. This is where the non-linear action time of Sujata's psychological investigations is juxtaposed with a linear plot development in order to help Sujata identify her class's and her own blindfolded assumptions and practices and to educate and activate herself politically. The dialogues appear in the next two sections, Noon and Afternoon, when Sujata meets Somu's mother and Nandini. Somu's family lives in a refugee settlement in South Kolkata. They had come here from East Pakistan after the Partition of India in 1947. For the ensuing twenty years, the situation only worsened for them.³³⁶ Through Sujata's gaze, we see the current condition of the house: 'the thatched roof had come down on one side and had to be supported with a stick. The low bedstead was no longer there. Bricks on the floor supported a flat wooden plank instead'.³³⁷ Somu's family has been destroyed; a few months after Somu's death, his father died of heart attack and his elder sister had to take care of the family. She has been facing public humiliation, rejection, and abuse for more than a year. Somu's mother cries constantly, being scared of the future. She says to Sujata, 'Didi, my daughter tells me she'll never get a job because she is Somu's

³³⁵ Srila Roy, *Remembering Revolution: Gender, Violence and Subjectivity in the Naxalbari Movement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 65.

³³⁶ Through choosing this family, Devi also tells us why a large section of the urban Naxalite youth was actually from the refugee colonies. On this, see Roy pp. 27-28; Raghab Bandyopadhyay's memoir, *Journal Sottor [70s' Journal]* (Kolkata: Ananda, 2000), especially pp. 16-17.

³³⁷ Devi, *Mother*, p. 58.

sister. Can it be true, Didi?’³³⁸ In Sujata’s first visit (this episode depicts her second), they cried together; but now she variously points at their class divisions: ‘Don’t compare yourself and my daughter, Didi. With all the contacts you have! [...] Didi, I have no contacts, I don’t have the money to hush things up or get things done’.³³⁹ This is a crucial passage through which Devi reveals how Sujata is made aware of her own privileges, and how class conditions a seemingly universal affect, grief. Somu’s mother is aware of the class divisions between her and Sujata, and the socio-economic power Sujata holds in society. She sees Sujata as a winner in everyday life and herself a loser. But Devi’s narrator makes us think that it is Sujata who has lost the game. Despite all these anxieties and pains, Somu’s mother can at least cry at her loss, mourn the dead, let the past go, and grapple with the present. But ‘Sujata could not weep before those whose first concern at Brati’s death had been to seek a way to hush up the news; her throat closed up tight. Somu’s mother wouldn’t understand’.³⁴⁰ The narrator is sympathetic to Sujata’s cause, but the narration after this also suggests that there is a link between class-difference and grief. Consider the narration:

Somu’s mother did not know that she had scored over Sujata; she had known what Somu was up to. Sujata may have had an aristocratic bearing, a stiff upper lip, a watch on her wrist and an expensive handloom sari. But Somu’s mother did not know that Sujata as a mother had lost out to thousands of mothers, for she had never known what Brati was up to.³⁴¹

On the surface, the narration points to the different assumptions that these women in grief make about each other, but a careful look shows that there is a connection made between the possibility of acquiring knowledge and the social class that the acquirer belongs to. Devi seems to suggest here that not only did Sujata not know Brati on an everyday basis, she *could not* have known him either. This is indicated by the exaggerated class markers: Sujata’s aristocratic bearing, stiff upper lip, a watch on the wrist, etc. Although Brati and Sujata share the same class location, nominally at least, they have digested different ideologies. Sujata has been a sympathetic and loving mother to Brati, but she is too deeply co-opted within her class privileges and boundaries to understand Brati, such as the change in his character or in his taste in

³³⁸ Ibid, p. 59.

³³⁹ Ibid, p. 59.

³⁴⁰ Ibid, p. 64.

³⁴¹ Ibid, p. 69.

dressing like an average person. Devi seems to suggest that Sujata's dutiful assimilation to her class and her practices of its privileges have precluded her from adequately knowing Brati as a human being and as a political subject. Although there is deep-seated grief within Sujata, the nature or expression of grief is highly marked by class. Indeed, the narrator seems to imply a double meaning here in the ritual of grief-making: if grief and silence make Sujata's post-Brati everyday life a process of piecing together answers for the solving of the puzzle, her social and economic conditions also help maintain the everyday in that particular way – preventing her from completing her task and her quest. To borrow from Srila Roy again, 'While Sujata rallies against expected norms of wifely devotion and submission to familial authority, she is also the main agent for the preservation of inherited moral values'.³⁴² Sujata feels emptied, lost to Somu's mother, who despite facing enormous socio-economic struggles, has her lost child's memories safe with her for mourning and for the negotiation with pain.

The process of affective politicisation is escalated in her meeting with Nandini, a middle-class urban Naxalite woman. Nandini and Brati loved each other, and both loved their city, Calcutta: 'the people, the houses, the neon signs, red roses in a wayside, florist's stall, festoons on the streets, newspapers pasted on boards near the bus stops, smiling faces, a beautiful image in a poem in a little magazine [...] everything spelt ecstasy; we couldn't hold the joy; we felt explosive'.³⁴³ They dreamt of living in these small joys and building a world where class differences would disappear and social equality would prevail. But the dream was destroyed by the police and the bourgeois Left. Nandini tells Sujata that they were betrayed by Anindya, who joined the CPI (M-L) from another group as a renegade.³⁴⁴ Though Nandini does not clarify which group Anindya belonged to, Calcutta in the 1970s saw a carnage for political factionalism of the Left. Sumanta Banerjee writes that the CPI (M) considered the CPI (M-L) as 'renegades in league with the Congress, out to sabotage the Party's parliamentary seizure of power,' while the CPI (M-L) branded the CPI (M) as 'neorevisionists misdirecting the people's struggle'.³⁴⁵ Banerjee adds that just before

³⁴² Roy, p. 65.

³⁴³ Devi, *Mother*, p. 77; for a study on love and marriage in Naxalite narratives, see the chapter 'Bhalobasha, Biye Biplab: On the Politics of Sexual Stories' in Roy, *Remembering*, pp. 98-119.

³⁴⁴ Ibid, p. 72, p. 83.

³⁴⁵ Banerjee, p. 193.

the elections in 1970, these two parties were engaged in ‘a bloody cycle of assaults and counter-assaults, murders, and vendetta [...] a senseless orgy of murders, misplaced fury, sadistic tortures, acted out with the vicious norms of the underworld’.³⁴⁶ Many of these feuds were orchestrated by the police, their spies, and the hoodlums of the Congress Party.³⁴⁷ Anindya was one of these latter characters who won the faith of his Naxalite friends and then divulged their secret information to the police. Brati came to know of it later and went out to alert Somu, their friend Bijit, and others, on the night he was killed. Nandini was not murdered but taken into custody. She was tortured for information, sexually abused and disabled: she lost sight in one of her eyes and is interned home now on medical grounds.³⁴⁸ Her parents tell her to get married, but she cannot forget her politics, the torture, and the burn ‘in the heart within’; neither can she forgive how easily the city and its people threw them away and forgot about them and their struggles. When she came out of jail, she could not believe that everything was so normal.³⁴⁹ She felt betrayed again, this time more devastatingly, by the common people and the middle class, by their apathies and insensitivities, by the fact that nothing had changed and yet people were seemingly perfectly happy with their circumstances. But these aspects did not discourage her from working again towards a socialist society, writing about the poor and the vulnerable, and making people aware of the pressing social and economic conditions plaguing the society. So, when a confused Sujata asks, ‘but haven’t things quietened down’ now? Nandini becomes furious and replies, ‘Nothing has quietened down, it can’t! [...] you of all persons should never say or believe that all is quiet now. Where does such complacency come from?’³⁵⁰ Devi suggests that the bourgeois tends to identify every form of protest (except its own) as disorder, and wants to always ‘quieten down’ things. Sujata tries to separate herself from this, but is deeply implicated in the scheme of things. The uncertainty in her asking whether things have quietened down comes from her punctuated, bridled vision of life, of the everyday space she traverses, of the ideology she inculcates, and of the class position she enjoys. Sujata’s everyday grief is as much a gendered rebellion against the politics of establishment in her family, as it is a result of the conditions of her gendered social

³⁴⁶ Ibid, p. 194.

³⁴⁷ Ibid, p. 191, p. 194.

³⁴⁸ Devi, *Mother*, p. 73.

³⁴⁹ She shouts at Sujata and says, ‘All that you people find normal, I find abnormal’, Ibid, p. 87.

³⁵⁰ Ibid, pp. 85-86.

position. This is why the novel ends on an ambiguous note. After her loud cry, Sujata falls unconscious, and Devi adds, ‘Dibyanath screamed. The appendix has burst!’³⁵¹ This sentence powerfully projects Devi’s corrosive irony at Dibyanath’s covering up of his wife’s pain. The patriarchal orientation of the society will continue to not engage with social and gender problems, and to distort meaning and emotions through its class-filtered and limited understanding – the limitation and privileges against which the Naxalite youth like Brati rebelled. However, as we have noted, Devi also gives us the indication that Somu’s mother and Nandini have motivated Sujata enough to rebel in her own way. At the end of each meeting, Sujata feels that this is probably the last time she is meeting with these people, suggesting that she has gathered enough affective and informative knowledge about Brati’s politics and the reason behind his murder to stand up against her family’s patriarchal injunctions and potentially against state violence. The possible vanishing of Somu’s mother and Nandini from her life is the beginning of her career as a rebel. Sujata’s rebellion is thus an indication of female solidarity and an act of political inspiration and transmission of female power. This is what Govind Nihlani’s film adaptation of the novel (1998) holds when it shows in the end that Sujata has become an NGO activist, working with Nandini to help the poor, and that Dibyanath also assists them.³⁵² Through the use of non-linear action time and linear plot development, Devi’s narration then offers a compelling case of affective politicisation and of the gendered resistance practice of the period. Recently, a number of critics have begun to reconstruct the gendered dimension of the Naxalbari movement, which has mostly been portrayed in academic discourses as a hyper-masculine event orchestrated by urban male youth, mostly ‘brilliant’,³⁵³ despite

³⁵¹ Ibid, p. 127.

³⁵² *Hazaar Chaurasi ki Maa*, dir. by Govind Nihlani (Udbhav Productions, 1998). In Devi’s novel however, it is impossible to imagine Dibyanath playing such a role. This is a revision of Devi’s novel and a suggestion of what gender politics might achieve. For a broader gender-based comparative study, one can consult the character of the old widow Drabomoyi in Nirmal Chattopadhyay’s story ‘Pipasa’, who resembles Somu’s mother. Draupadi in Devi’s story ‘Draupadi’ is a strong match for Nandini’s courage and strength. Sujata’s character shares many similarities with the mother of the murdered Naxalite Badal in Samaresh Basu’s short story ‘Shahider Maa’, with Nirupama in Pradip Mitra’s story ‘Samay-Asamay’, and more recently with Sujata in Arundhati Mukhopadhyay’s story ‘Samudrasakhshi’. Unfortunately, much of the creative Naxalite literature remains untranslated in English, for a reader versed in Bangla the field is rich, and she or he can begin the task of recuperating the role of gender and the highly complex nature of gender portrayal in the creative literature of the Naxalite period from these different works.

³⁵³ See Dasgupta, pp. 94-95; Banerjee, p. 52; for a complex sociological understanding on this, see Rabindra Ray, *The Naxalites and their Ideology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), pp. 52-81; for a critique on such a representation, see Mallarika Sinha Roy, *Gender and Radical Politics in India: Magic Moments of Naxalbari (1967-1975)* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2011), pp. 23-28.

women playing a significant part.³⁵⁴ These critics have recuperated the important role creative literature plays in the project of reconstruction.³⁵⁵ Devi's powerful rendering of the lives of a fighting Naxalite woman, an enduring and impoverished mother, and a politicised bourgeois woman appears to be an excellent example for this project.

If dream and dialogues affectively and critically politicise Sujata, in *Operation? – Bashai Tudu* memory is used politically to explore the relations between caste, law, and Left politics in a postcolonial rural society. The one-day narrative, unlike *Mother*, does not have a neat diurnal division of time, though there is still a fairly coherent development of plot. The narration is divided into thirteen parts. The first four parts are about the scary news (for the police and the local political party members) that Bashai has been seen in action again. As Kali begins his journey on a night, the narrative from the fifth part onwards adopts the memory mode – of the first time Kali came to these jungles to talk to Bashai in 1970 when Bashai decided to become a revolutionary. The next seven parts, from the fifth to the eleventh, are about Bashai's four 'operations' (murders) of four jotedars and his own four deaths by the police and the army. This is an extension of Kali's memories and appears partly as omniscient narration. The final two parts are again in the current time: dawn has broken and Kali has found the cave where Bashai was supposed to be after a fight with the police. But there is no Bashai, only syringes, blood-stained bandages, medicines, etc. A tired Kali falls asleep as 'a small battalion entered the forest and moved with inhuman uncanny skill toward where Kali slept. Their feet tramping on the wet earth moved silently'.³⁵⁶ The narration ends, like *Mother*, on an ambiguous note: that Bashai might have left the cave and that Kali might just be killed. The ambiguity here suggests that repressive and ideological power structures will continue to be powerful. At the same time, Devi's narration of subaltern resistance and representation of the misreadings of the underprivileged convey a deep sense of faith in and support for

³⁵⁴ See Srila Roy, *Remembering*; Mallarika Sinha Roy, *Magic Moments*.

³⁵⁵ As sociologist Mallarika Sinha Roy writes, 'Creative literature is not merely useful for filling the gaps of academic history with imaginative history but provides new insights to read the movement from the perspective of gender relations and sexual politics' (p. 46). She adds that writing a 'compensatory' history of gender in the Naxalbari movement would be meaningless if gender is understood as the structures of differential sexual power-relations and their historical and systematic implementations. In place of a vaguely existing archival resource on women and gender relations, she proposes the use of 'imaginary memory', where archival and cultural memories, interviews, memoirs, and creative literature could be exploited to understand the practices and loopholes of gender in the movement. See Sinha Roy, *Magic Moments*, pp. 9-12, pp. 36-46.

³⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 148.

resistant practices and ideologies.³⁵⁷ Kali's memory plays two roles. First, it is used to linearly develop the character of Bashai as a strong, intelligent, sincere, and sympathetic human being, and that of Kali as a deeply loyal and honest Party cadre whose views are always disregarded and whose sincerity is exploited by opportunist Party members. He is sensitive to Bashai and listens to the tribal subaltern patiently. Second, through the memory-based informed debates and dialogues, the narration sometimes also enters astute sociological/statistical readings of law in the postcolonial rural societies. In these expertly analytical passages, Kali's memories no longer seem to belong to his only, but are expanded to accommodate the narrator's critical evaluation of the living conditions in the peripheries of India.

Asked why he chose to become a revolutionary rather than the loyal Party member he had been previously, Bashai tells Kali about the Party's neglect of the pressing issues of caste hierarchy and minimum wage. Despite having worked for the party with full commitment, neither have Bashai's political views and opinions been taken into consideration (his tribal and low-caste background have often been made clear to him³⁵⁸), nor has he been promoted in party rank or given a political portfolio. Answering Kali's question that he should forget the past and his narrow social-identity-based politics and re-join the Party rather than resort to armed struggle, Bashai says, 'How can you make a Santal forget that he is a Santal? You are yet to know your country, your people. Can you give us a country where the Party comrades at least will not make distinctions between Santal comrades, Kaora comrades, and comrades from the upper castes?'³⁵⁹ Kali remains silent, because there is no answer to this question. He knows that the Party has become a bastion of middle-class and *jotedari* interests,³⁶⁰ and that people like him who still want to follow the principles of socialist and Communist politics are derided within the Party, silenced, and made into expendable figures. Although the jotedars evicted the tenant-peasants fearing that the CPI (M)-led United Front Government would bring horrible prospects, it appears that in 1977, ten years from the Naxalbari Movement, the jotedars have now comfortably shifted to

³⁵⁷ Here Devi's strategy reminds us of Frank Kermode's notion that endings in fiction can give us crucial insights on the process of meaning-making in life. See Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967).

³⁵⁸ As he says to Kali: 'At Samanta babu's house, didn't I see you [Kali] and your class served tea in chinaware cups, and an earthen cup for me?' Devi, *Bashai*, p. 24.

³⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

³⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 31: 'The class loyalties of the professed believers in a classless society were no less strong than those of the bigoted'.

Left politics and are ruling the Left organisations on their caste- and class-based interests. Kali remembers Bashai telling him in another meeting that the agriculturalists have always supported the Kishan Sabha and other Communist fronts or the middle and small peasantry during their protests, especially during the *Tebhaga Movement*, '[b]ut the Communist peasants' front never upheld the rights of the agricultural labourers. Can you tell me why, Kali-babu? Why? Wasn't it because the middle peasantry remains the mainstay of the Communist Kishan Sabha?'³⁶¹ This middle peasantry, constituted of the jotedars and the mahajans, of people like Nakul-babu, Samanta-babu, etc., have been reaping the profits, using the Party to promote their land- and class-based interests. Here Bashai tells Kali that these people have been holding power since the pre-independence era, that the jotedar's rule and exploitation of the sharecroppers and landless peasantry dates back to the early twentieth century, and that Kishan Sabha, which should have been the voice of the small peasantry, has betrayed their interests time and again, especially in the context of minimum wage.³⁶² Thus, when Kali says that this is the failure of the leadership, Bashai knows too well of the *bhadralok* (upper-caste and upper-class) nature of Left politics and gives an insightful response:

Oh, no. The *leadership* was fine. They did the right thing. For who were the leaders after all? The *bhadralok* babus. They were concerned with the interests of the *bhadralok* babus. Kali-babu, it is only the babus who have been leaders all along, for it is the *babu leaders* alone who'd uphold the rights and interests of the *bhadraloks*, the rich peasantry, and the middle peasantry.³⁶³

These lines remind us of Chakraborty's novel *Ākāler Sandhāne*, where the postcolonial rural society was shown to be dominated by *bhadralok* *babu* politics. But unlike in Chakraborty's novel where lower-caste people like Poran and Durga continue to be exploited by the upper-caste babus, Bashai and his fellow comrades, who are politically educated, and are not Naxalites, have decided to take up arms against the Party leaders and their class-/caste-based politics: 'Let me begin, Kali-babu. I'm thinking of a new strategy. It's new because it's old'.³⁶⁴ The strategy is

³⁶¹ Ibid, p. 29.

³⁶² Ibid, pp. 45-48.

³⁶³ Ibid, pp. 34-35; in the translation, Devi's English words were emphasised to make it clear for the translated version.

³⁶⁴ Ibid, p. 22.

guerrilla warfare, but Devi clearly indicates that this warfare is not a unique import from Maoist China or derived from the theories of urban intellectuals. Peasants have often resorted to armed struggle in Indian history. Bashai here refers to historical events such as the Santhal rebellion and the Munda rebellion. As the narrator states later, these histories of courageous resistance are either accorded little attention in mainstream history writings, or are co-opted within a nationalist liberation narrative. These acts do not however invalidate peasant insurgency, nor does it erase the use of armed struggle in peasant resistance from their cultural memory (which remains etched through songs and other folk cultural practices).³⁶⁵ Bashai and his comrades took up arms because they could not tolerate jotedar exploitation any further, because they knew that despite words of support and assistance, the Party leaders would be taking care primarily of the interests of their class, because there had never been a leader from the lower class or caste. Bashai categorically points out the social location of the babus: ‘The babus are a caste by themselves, like the bagdis, and the Kaoras, yes, a caste. And that’s why such a good man like you have to take stand with the babus only because you are a babu yourself. And then in the party *circle* you would give us lectures on the *class* struggle. No, Kali-babu you will never convince me’.³⁶⁶ Through the nature of these dialogues and such pointed retorts, Devi shows Bashai’s deep awareness of social conditions and party principles, and suggests that an uncritical, unstudied importation of the tenets of Marxism implemented in a postcolonial society is not going to help the analysis or the overcoming of contemporary socio-economic problems. These lines spoken through Kali’s consciousness show the narrator’s, and consequently Devi’s, astute readings of the political-economic character of Indian society. ‘A law that taught you to forget the lower rung with every rung you rose on the ladder. Rise-a-rung-forget-the-lower-rung was a single law of climbing that persisted in every field of Indian experience, in religion, politics, business, education, culture, and personal life. This was the Indian *tradition*’.³⁶⁷ Through these dialogues, developed linearly, Devi’s fictional rendering

³⁶⁵ Devi uses them throughout her tribal fiction. For a comparative study, see *Chotti Munda and his Arrow*, trans. by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Malden: Blackwell, 2003).

³⁶⁶ Devi, *Bashai*, p. 24.

³⁶⁷ Ibid, p. 31; for an account of the history of the Indian Left, see Praful Bidwai, *The Phoenix Moment*. Marx’s eurocentrism and the Indian Left’s reluctance to engage with caste issues have been matters of long debate within the Indian Marxist historiography, which gave birth in the early eighties to the widely influential neo-Marxist Subalternist school of history writing. In this context, see Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasants in Colonial India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983); Partha Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought in the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse* (London: Zed, 1986);

of the peasant insurgency appears to give voice to Bashai, the subaltern. Without giving Bashai a chance to speak, Devi knows, the Naxalite or tribal resistance would continue to remain a victim of critical misreading and administrative injustice. As I will show, Bashai appears not only a politically conscious subaltern here, aware of his rights and duties, but also a 'subaltern' in the more definitive military sense, who is ready to fight his superior if the brutal and historical nature of the injustice inflicted on the tribals is not stopped.

The non-linearity of action time is also executed through the device of memory, which gives the writing an expert/academic style and allows Devi to use fiction as a tool for social investigation. After the dialogues between Kali and Bashai, from the seventh section onwards, the narrative is composed of Kali's memories of Bashai's four jotedar-killing 'operations'. The narrative begins with the fact that Kali can still remember Bashai's Banari operation, and from the fifth part onwards the narrative is spoken by an omniscient narrator who historicises the occasion by telling us how the jotedar Pratap Goldar has been exploiting bonded and landless labourers by not paying them their shared crops or their minimum wage. Bashai teaches the labourers about their rights, requests Goldar to pay them their dues without trouble, and after being refused and forced to fight, kills him. In describing Bashai's remaining three operations, Devi historicises the conditions of the peasantry under jotedar and mahajan rule, and describes in detail various subaltern acts of resistance. In these descriptions, the omniscient narration is often interspersed with historical/bureaucratic idioms of reporting/recording, where policy reports or excerpts from research papers crowd the narrative. In the middle of the Banari operation, for instance, the narrator states, 'Before we begin our account of Operation Banari it would only be proper to put on record that the agricultural labourers of Banari had not told that deputy Labour Commissioner the whole truth when he had come in inquiry'.³⁶⁸ This is then followed by a summary of the inquiry commission reports on minimum wage. The explanations often borrow from existing political-economic reports and policies where the language

Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*. For a critique of the subalternist school of history writing and its uncritical use of Marx and capitalism, see Vivek Chibber, *Postcolonial Theory and the Spectre of Capital* (London: Verso, 2013). For a wider reading on this, see August Nimtz, 'The Eurocentric Marx and Engels and Other Related Myths', in *Marxism, Modernity and Postcolonial Studies*, ed. by Crystal Bartolovich and Neil Lazarus (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 65-80; and Kolja Lindner, 'Marx's' Eurocentrism: Postcolonial Studies and Marx Scholarship', *Radical Philosophy*, 161 (2010), pp. 27-42.

³⁶⁸ Devi, *Bashai*, p. 65.

becomes sophisticated and technical: ‘the last notification in 1974 had related the wage rate to the consumer price index for the agricultural labour and noted “The minimum rate for wages as revised above are on the basis of the Agricultural Consumer Price Index (60-61=100) for 1972-3 at 233 points”’.³⁶⁹ The narration continues in this vein: ‘It should be noted at this point that there was a mistake in the notification’, and goes on to describe the mistake and analyse how the minimum wage reports have put it wrong and have been cheating the agricultural labourers for decades. This is clearly a commentary by the narrator, even though it is supposed to be part of Kali’s memories. The next section then begins, ‘Kali Santra was called back to the immediate present at the sound of a cautious scraping outside’.³⁷⁰ Hence, the suggestion is that Kali has started thinking about these incidents and fallen asleep when the narrator breaks in and supplies a more accurate, historical, and dramatised rendering of the events, which includes reasoning out data, fractions, policy reports, etc. Reminding us of the novel’s preface where Devi elucidates and pinpoints the socio-economic conditions in the periphery as one of the reasons for the movement using quantitative and data-based historical knowledge, the use of these quantitative data and policy reports here suggests the narrator’s analytical skill and political acumen.³⁷¹ Although there are a number of precedents on the technique of juxtaposing the ‘expert’ narrator and the ‘subaltern’ character, where the ‘expert’ narrator’s ‘facts’ are tested through the prism of the subaltern character’s experience – such as Multatuli’s *Max Havelaar* (1860) and J. G. Farrell’s *The Singapore Grip* (1978), to name just a couple from the last two centuries³⁷² – what is unique in Devi is the specifics of caste and tribe in India. The narrator is using data and calculations to present the wide gap between state policies for the Adivasis and their implementation. Alessandra Marino argues that Devi uses

³⁶⁹ Ibid, p. 121.

³⁷⁰ Ibid, p. 83.

³⁷¹ Consider, for instance, this passage from the ‘Preface’: ‘The long history of the peasant insurgency in India (where the landless peasantry number nearly fifty million and constitute 26.33 per cent of the country’s total labour force) has shown up time and again the nature of exploitation that has been the fate of the peasants. [...] The local *jotedars* have exploited them for ages under a sharecropping system that enabled them to provide the landless peasants with seeds, ploughs and plough cattle, some food with little money, and to appropriate the major share of the harvest. [...] The planters (*jotedars*) evicted the *ādhiārs* (sharecroppers) by force and set their elephants to raze their huts to the ground. The peasants of Naxalbari mobilized against such persecution and exploitation and rose in an insurrection that inspired the deprived and exploited peasantry in the neighbouring states of Andhra [sic], Kerala, Tamilnadu [sic], Bihar and Orissa’. Mahasweta Devi, ‘Author’s Preface to the Present Edition’, in *Bashai Tudu*, pp. xv-xvi.

³⁷² Multatuli, *Max Havelaar, or the Coffee Auctions of a Dutch Trading Company*, trans. by Roy Edwards (London: Penguin, 1987); J. G. Farrell, *The Singapore Grip* (London: Flamingo, 1984).

this style to make us, (bourgeois) readers, aware of the problems of law and citizenship for the tribal people in postcolonial India.³⁷³ Through constantly engaging with legal and political problems in the postcolonial peripheries of India, Devi, Marino says, throws at us the uneasy question:

What is the meaning of democracy if its very system remains inaccessible to the majority of poor citizens? The preservation of feudalist power dynamics empties the nation of its promises of freedom and development for all. Independence is meaningless without the achievement of basic rights for agricultural workers, for whom the new laws and the constitution may prove to be meaningless.³⁷⁴

Devi's critique, I agree with Marino here, builds from her understanding that modernisation and development, which have brought forth 'modernity' in India, have also systematically cornered and destroyed the Adivasi world. The postcolonial society, which has ironically extended colonialism's modernising drives, has continued to view the Adivasis as criminals and illegal nomads. The thrust of Devi's narrative is thus a challenge as much to the dominant political logic as it is to the bourgeois realist lens. However, I read such a historically-conscious realist aesthetics not as 'oppositional modernism',³⁷⁵ as Marino does, but as critical irrationalism. Devi's irrationalism emerges from her act of giving voice to the peripheral and subaltern characters and making them interventional into the bourgeois realist world. Her characters realise the problems within the existing dominant framework and try to break open or confront the framework. They subvert bourgeois philosophy and bourgeois political life. Devi's fiction is derived from her close familiarity with tribal experience. She has been critical of the postcolonial state because she can see through its lies and its neo-colonial character; it is only at its peripheries that the true (evil) character of the state is revealed. She wants to highlight the conditions of state deprivation, discrimination, and violence in the periphery, and thus fractures the

³⁷³ Alessandra Marino, *Acts of Angry Writing: On Orientalism and Citizenship in Postcolonial India* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2015).

³⁷⁴ Ibid, p. 48.

³⁷⁵ Ibid, p. 68; another scholar Sophie McCall thinks that Devi's documentary fiction, in its interesting combination of history, myth, and journalism, provides crucial insights on the current state of debt-bondage, sex trade, and migration patterns of tribal women in postcolonial India. Though Devi is an exciting writer in engaging with social scientific investigation, McCall is also aware of the challenges of the politics of translation and interpretation of Devi's works. See McCall, 'Mahasweta Devi's Documentary Fiction as Critical Antidote: Rethinking Bonded Labour, "Women and Development" and Sex Trade in India', *Resources for Feminist Research*, 29.3/4 (2002), 39-58.

omniscient sequential realist narration to accord the peripheral voice, and the strength and ability to speak. She also shows how the characters engage in active participation with one another. In the case of Sujata, it is Somu's mother and Nandini who debate with her, affectively politicise her, and make her aware of the problems of the deeply consumerist-patriarchal nature of life in the postcolonial urban sphere. In the case of Bashai, it is Kali who listens, argues, and ponders. With him, we too are led to ponder about the current conditions in Indian rural societies. Her irre realism is a political choice through which she attempts to tell us as much about the catastrophic effects of modernisation and development, of living in the margins as and with the subaltern, as it is about the difficulty of narrating a story about these issues. I will substantiate my points on critical irre realism through a brief discussion of how the quest mode has been used here.

Quest as the *Oxford English Dictionary* tells us is 'a search or pursuit in order to find something', an 'inquiry'.³⁷⁶ In the Middle Ages, when quest romances were popular, the quest would mean completing hard tasks, fulfilling chivalric duties and tests of constancy and chastity. As Tim Young writes, 'The protagonist embarks on a mission, encounters impediments, removes them (more often than not), attains his or her goal and sets out on the return voyage, having increased his or her (usually his) own worth through the successful completion of the objective'.³⁷⁷ In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, Grail quest romances were revived mainly in France.³⁷⁸ Jonathan Ulliot finds that this revival influenced the Irish Literary Revival and modernist interest in the Middle Ages.³⁷⁹ Ulliot, who writes on the European modernist failed quest narratives to which we will return soon, thinks that one of the main reasons behind the modernist popularity of the Grail quest romances lay in their emphatic depiction of success through adventure. In a quest narrative, there is a strong presumption about acquiring a certain object, although the path of acquisition is beset with improbable, unpredictable difficulties. In our discussion so far, we have found that Devi uses her protagonists to psychologically explore the reasons of the murder

³⁷⁶ 'Quest', *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, University of Warwick Library Database <<http://0-www.oed.com.pugwash.lib.warwick.ac.uk/>> [accessed 16 Jan, 2017].

³⁷⁷ Tim Young, *The Cambridge Introduction to Travel Writing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013) p. 88.

³⁷⁸ See Janine Dakyns, *The Middle Ages in French Literature: 1851–1900* (London: Oxford University Press, 1973).

³⁷⁹ Jonathan Ulliot, *The Medieval Presence in Modernist Literature: The Quest to Fail* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), p. 10.

and the re-appearance of Brati and Bashai through memory and dreams, and to undertake physical journeys to investigate, understand, and uncover the larger historical issues involved in individual struggles. I will read these psycho-physical explorations as quests. The use of the quest here is interesting and different in several ways. The quester is in search of someone whom he or she either does not know or knows very little. The path also appears to be clearer: Neither Sujata nor Kali has to face anything physically challenging in their quests save their own conflicts, anxieties, and traumas. Sujata knows whom she has to meet and how to meet them, in the same way as Kali knows how to find Bashai in the jungle or the medium, Betul Kaora, who can help him out in his journey. But the object of the quest has no static meaning or fixed location. Both Brati and Bashai are incomprehensible for the questers, and the quests are as much about finding them or finding out the reasons for their deaths as they are about understanding what the quested objects stand for. As Sujata talks to Somu's mother and Nandini, new facets of Brati's life are unfolded, and she comes to know of the ideology that Brati believed in and how it was crushed by the representatives of state machinery such as the inspector Saroj Pal.³⁸⁰ Kali Santra's quest unravels Bashai's story, his reasons behind taking up armed struggles, and the current condition of Left politics. However, as has been noted, Kali hardly understands Bashai or his politics because, as Bashai repeatedly makes it clear, as a *babu*, it is a historically and epistemologically complex task for Kali to understand a Santhal. Sujata also says on numerous occasions that she hardly understood Brati and has failed as a mother, which, according to Nandini, is partly due to her class location and class-shaped everyday life. Kali fails in his quest to find Bashai and locates instead a bloodied bandage, a syringe, cotton, etc., indicating that Bashai is probably wounded but still alive. In both contexts then, the quest seems to have failed. It is doubtful whether they have fulfilled their tasks of locating their supposed targets. It is also doubtful, from the novels' ambiguous endings, whether the knowledge they have gained about their own characters, prejudices, and assumptions in the course of the quest will transform their characters. Failed quests are characteristic of modernist writing. Ulliyot tells us that European modernist writers such as T. S. Eliot, Franz Kafka, Samuel Beckett, and others have all used the failed quest format and its

³⁸⁰ Quest here takes the meaning of inquest or inquiry. Since the police and her family have decided not to speak about Brati, Sujata takes the inquiry upon her.

structural incoherence in order to indicate the existence of a bitter, cynical, and suspecting post-war society where hope, optimism, and success appear only as illusions. For Ulliyot, these writers were theoretically committed to the notion of failure, as opposed to success in quest formats, which they presented through the stylistic challenges in the texts: ‘After all, the modernist narrative committed to failure simply fails – it fails to tell a complete or coherent story, it defers its outcome, it collapses into fragments or ends abruptly, it gets side-tracked or reaches a deadlock, it fails to present a coherent idea even of why it fails, and the narrator or implied author seems to fall prey to the despair or confusion of his protagonist’.³⁸¹ They have presented ‘a repetitive, fragmented, and nonlinear text that privileges moments of paradox, confusion, anxiety, and breakdown over moments of revelation, discovery, coherence, and resolution’.³⁸² Ulliyot is right about the failed quest aspect in modernist writing and the structural improvisations, but neither Kafka, Beckett, nor, for that matter, Devi, I think, fails to write a coherent narrative or ‘fails to present a coherent idea even of why it fails’. Devi does use the failed quest narrative to indicate that it is difficult for members of the elite classes to understand the material conditions and emancipatory struggles of the peripheral, Naxalite, Santhal characters, but she uses a very coherent, purposeful narrative. The stories discussed in this chapter may not display complete closures, but, as I have shown, they do have their plot development, suspense, climax, and sustained engagement with an immediate historical social reality. While for Ulliyot, the stylistic aspects of failed quest narratives challenge any possibility of realist writing, for Devi, narrative incommensurability and social reality appear to be intricately related. The structural and formal peculiarities are a way to represent peripheral history, to expose the structural logic of oppressions in the periphery, and to realistically present the issues involved. These elements remind us of the definition that Benita Parry gives of modernist writings in peripheral, postcolonial societies.³⁸³ Taking from the world-systems theory of Immanuel Wallerstein, Giovanni Arrighi, Samir Amin and others, and from Franco Moretti’s formulation of a ‘one and unequal world-system’ where core, peripheral, and semi-peripheral societies are coerced into the capitalist mode of production ‘in a relationship

³⁸¹ Ulliyot, *Medieval*, p. 5.

³⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 1.

³⁸³ Benita Parry, ‘Aspects of Peripheral Modernisms’, *ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature*, 40.1 (2009), 27-55.

of growing inequality,' Parry argues that there might be affinities found culturally between the peripheral and semi-peripheral regions, from the once-colonised countries to regions in Eastern Europe, the Middle East and Southeast Asia, in their 'incongruous overlapping of social realities and experiences from radically different historical moments'.³⁸⁴ These cultural affinities, resulting from different societies' mode of insertion into capitalist modernity, are most visibly found in the use of stylistic irregularities in literature, especially in novels, and constitute irrealism in the periphery. Parry also borrows from Michael Löwy to conceptualise peripheral (ir)realism, which, for her, is marked by the odd juxtaposition of 'the mundane and the fantastic, the recognizable and the improbable, the seasonal and the eccentric, the earthborn and the fabulous, the legible and the oneiric, historically inflected and mystical states of consciousness'.³⁸⁵ The stylistic irregularities of the failed quest, and the social and historical aspects attached to it, can be understood along the lines of Parry's reading of irrealism. But I also think the word 'critical' in critical irrealism, which Parry does not use in her theorisation, is crucial here for Devi and Bhattacharya. Not only do these writers implicate the problems of linearity and regularity in peripheral narration, they also use the narrator influentially to comment on social issues and dominant injunctions. The rest of the discussion on Devi's quest mode and critical irrealism will focus on her use of the forceful narrator and recurrent trope of the absent presence of the Naxalite character or the tribal insurgent.

The Interventionist Narrator and the Non-Death of the Insurgent

The interventionist and critical aspect of Devi's irrealism is presented most prominently through the castigating, ironic voice of the narrator. Reminding us of Lukács' concept of realist 'narration' as participation in the narrative,³⁸⁶ Devi's

³⁸⁴ Ibid, p. 30.

³⁸⁵ Ibid, p. 39.

³⁸⁶ In the essay, 'Narrate or Describe?', Lukács makes a distinction between realist and naturalist art. Realist novelists such as Balzac, Tolstoy, Stendhal, Scott, and others use narration taking the 'standpoint of a participant', while naturalists like Zola and Flaubert use 'description', 'the standpoint of an observer' (p. 111). While he finds the realist writers actively involved in the socio-economic practices of their times and trying to eke out the struggle between man and the social conflicts in the protagonists, making use of descriptions of inanimate objects interlinked with the main events of the narrative, the naturalists, writing in the aftermath of the 1848 Revolution in France, appear to react to capitalist dehumanisation mainly through the mode of observations; their criticism of the society and culture becomes their mode of participation, which is an isolated, clinical, still-life description. Lukács thus posits that the absence of participation or narration in naturalist art is mainly the absence of humanistic ideology (p. 143). See 'Narrate and Describe?', in *Writer and Critic*, pp. 110-48.

narrator often enters her protagonists' minds, extending the capacity or the limit of their consciousness and exposing the underlying structures or the forces that control the societies concerned. But unlike Tolstoy or Balzac who, Lukács found, were located in and reacting to the transitional period of crises (their countries' socio-economic transition to capitalism), Devi is situated within the conjuncture of historical crisis, where the apparatuses of colonialism, capitalism, and the democratic postcolonial state combine to inflict caste, class, and gender atrocities on the peripheral postcolonial subject on an everyday basis, where the agitations by women, peasants, the urban poor, or lower-caste people are deemed anti-state and are brutally crushed, and where civil society appears to be more sensitive to the violation of human rights in Vietnam, Bangladesh, and other countries than in the immediate context in Bengal. Devi's narrator thus uses the realist property of 'narration', but her intervention is forceful, energetic, and ruthless. Consider this section from *Mother of 1084*:

There is no longer any unrest or panic. No shop or market suddenly pulling down shutters, no doors to houses being slammed shut [...] no black cars, helmeted policemen and gun-toting soldiers pursue some desperate lone young boy. Nor does one see bodies tied by rope to the wheels of police vans, still alive, being dragged and slammed against the asphalt [...] Happy and peaceful households are back.³⁸⁷

This passage appears in the beginning of the 'Noon' section where Sujata visits Somu's house in the refugee colony. The narrator describes the material conditions of the colony, recalls the bloody scenes of violence there during the movement, and then adds that there is nothing to fear anymore, that everything has become calm and composed. Note the trenchant irony in the words 'happy and peaceful'. The graphic descriptions of horror, the bodies being tied to the wheels of police vans, and so on, heighten the irony here. The middle class did not come out to help these youths who dreamt about the end of class domination and structural oppression; instead, it demanded happiness and peace at the cost of ruthless annihilation of young people – the same happiness that makes Nandini virulent with anger and disgusted at the shamelessness and betrayal of the middle class. At the same time, by describing the 'calm' in terms of what was there just yesterday or the other day, Devi proposes that the spectre or ghost of that recent violence continues to haunt the 'calm', which

³⁸⁷ Devi, *Mother*, p. 34.

therefore becomes just a surface reality, papered over something horrible and very different. The use of irony in the narrator's commentary becomes more scathing, sarcastic, and direct in the evaluation of the role of civil society during the period:

Exactly a year and three months later, the writers, artists and intellectuals turned West Bengal upside down out of sympathy with and support for the cause of Bangladesh. Surely they must have been thinking the right thoughts, and mothers like Sujata must have been on the wrong track altogether [...] Since they could ignore the daily orgy of blood that stained Calcutta and concentrate on the brutal ceremony of death beyond the border, their vision must have been flawless. Sujata's vision was surely wrong. The poets, writers, intellectuals and artists are honoured members of society, recognized spokesmen for the country at large.³⁸⁸

One cannot fail to notice the bitter tone and the pointed criticism here. The middle class is not concerned about police violence against the Naxalite youth. The poets and intellectuals who are the conscience keepers of their societies have decided to ignore the phenomenon, the everyday bloodbath, and to show their support for the Bangladesh liberation war. Devi has pointed this out in her preface to *Bashai Tudu*: 'the hired writers pandering to the middle and upper classes content themselves with weaving narcissistic fantasies in the name of literature'.³⁸⁹ They do not care to pay heed to the current and immediate context. She represents this aspect through the character of the poet Dhiman Ray in *Mother of 1084*, who writes revolutionary Naxalite poetry to charm his upper-class (female) audience in big affluent parties.³⁹⁰ This also reminds us of what the literary critics Nirmal Ghosh and Phatik Chand Ghosh have found in their evaluation of popular Naxalite literature – the Naxalite as a romantic youth excessively suffering from idealism. The writers and artists followed suit and reaped commercial benefit from this. Through this passage, Devi thus points a finger at the irresponsible actions taken by the civil society, the critical thinkers, and the 'honoured members of society'. But Devi does not only criticise these actions, she also points the way towards resolution. Her narrative tone shifts from sarcasm and irony to pity and concern at the question of how to represent the Naxalite, or the peripheral Santhal insurgent whose voice the state and the mainstream media have

³⁸⁸ Ibid, pp. 50-51.

³⁸⁹ Devi, 'Author's Preface', p. xvii.

³⁹⁰ Devi, *Mother*, p. 116.

long put down or are not ready to hear; the question of how to listen to them and engage with their problems meaningfully. This passage from *Bashai Tudu* is a telling example of such concern:

But one would lose Bashai if one refused to listen to what he had to say or didn't care to understand what he said. And then without having understood him, when one tried to present him conveniently for the records as something different from what he really was, who would be the loser? Bashai Tudu? Or the new interpreters? Where were the research analysts of the future who would salvage the truth from the mountains of untruths and set the records straight? There were too many truths in the world distorted into lies in the records through the conspiracy of the administration. Isn't there daily assassination of truths going on continuously?³⁹¹

The narrator clearly suggests that no one is ready to listen to the tribal voice with sympathy. The researcher, the analyst, or the journalist, who goes from the 'mainland' of India to listen to the problems of the Adivasis in the peripheral regions, collects their data for sociological analysis and leaves. They either do not understand the demands of the tribal people or do not want to understand, as their interpretations are predicated on analysis of quantitative data, so that sympathy and love for the Adivasis never enter the frame. As Devi tells Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in her interview in *Imaginary Maps*: 'The tribal and the mainstream have always been parallel. There has never been a meeting point. The mainstream simply does not understand the parallel'.³⁹² This is what Devi has been trying to show through her writings and activism: her everyday living with the Adivasis, her journalism and pamphlets exposing state atrocities or negligence, and her fictions highlighting the problem of life and living in the periphery. She plays the role of a patient listener – the character she finds lacking in the practical world of data collection for the government about the Adivasis. Spivak writes in her commentary in *Imaginary Maps* that 'we must *learn* to learn from the original practical ecological philosophers of the world, through slow, attentive, mind-changing (on both sides), ethical singularity that deserves the name of "love" – to supplement necessary collective efforts to change laws, modes of production, systems of education, and health care'.³⁹³ Devi contributes to this

³⁹¹ Devi, *Bashai*, p. 41.

³⁹² Spivak, *Imaginary*, p. x.

³⁹³ *Ibid*, pp. 200-01; emphasis in original.

‘learning’ through her dual roles of activist and creative writer, teaching us how to practise the relationship of ‘a witnessing love and a supplementing collective struggle’.³⁹⁴ The term ethical singularity is vital in this context, but Spivak’s use here appears confusing. Ethical singularity, Spivak writes, is the ‘secret encounter’ between the (subaltern) leader and her or his respondent where what is not said is taken into consideration responsibly through what *has been* said. But since ‘it is impossible for all leaders (subaltern or otherwise) to engage every subaltern in this way, especially across the gender divide’, ethics always becomes the ‘experience of the impossible’.³⁹⁵ She corroborates this point by saying that this impossibility ‘is not identical with the frank and open exchange between radicals and the oppressed in times of crisis’.³⁹⁶ It is never clear what Spivak means by the times of crisis here. Are they the time-periods of upheavals, different from everyday struggles, when the subaltern’s singular voice is collectively represented? If so, what is the nature of such crisis? Is this a sudden crisis or has this been going on for centuries? It is also never clear when the subaltern can have a frank exchange with the intellectual, or whether it is at all possible to know that an open and frank exchange will have nothing secretive about it. I think a better meaning of this crucial term ‘ethical singularity’ lies in the idea that intellectuals should learn to become committed and ethical readers or auditors of the complex subaltern/tribal social forms and ‘knowledges’, of the accumulated nature of gender discrimination without attempting to fully ‘comprehend’ or ‘apprehend’ the tribal. Where writings by other authors often propose the possibility of sympathetic communication with the subaltern other (tribals, women, or tribal women), Devi asks us to do something much more difficult – to maintain sympathy and solidarity by accepting the failure in communicating with or understanding them. Her narrative is thus geared towards this failure of communication, or incommensurability, while attempting to generate, as in the case of Puran in his long short story ‘Pterodactyl’, ‘love, excruciating love’ for the wretched of the earth.³⁹⁷ But Devi also knows that this element of love and care is largely missing from what the state agents and official auditors did. Thus, her writings always feature a narrator who is either one of these agent-characters, or a supporter of such characters but who criticises their lack of

³⁹⁴ Ibid, p. 201.

³⁹⁵ Ibid, p. xxv.

³⁹⁶ Ibid, p. xxv.

³⁹⁷ Devi, ‘Pterodactyl, Puran Sahay, and Pirtha’ in *Imaginary Maps: Three Stories*, trans. by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (London: Routledge, 1995), pp. 95-196.

sympathy.³⁹⁸ As her narrator in *Bashai Tudu* puts it: ‘Where were the research analysts of the future who would salvage the truth from the mountains of untruths and set the records straight?’³⁹⁹ The binary opposite of the speaking subaltern and the deaf/unsympathetic listener is what makes her narration so sharp, so critical, and comparable to an act of journalistic and social activism. Devi’s role as a writer and activist is thus situated in her powerful design of narrator, in her socially responsible and ethical attempts at listening to the tribal’s problems and making us aware of them. As Neil Lazarus writes in a reading of ‘Pterodactyl’, the ‘responsibility for establishing this link (between sustainability of the human life and recovery of forms of aboriginal sociality) lies not with those who have been displaced, dispossessed and marginalised by “India” (local avatar of the “modern”), but with the likes of Puran Sahay and, more generally, ourselves (her presumptive readers)’.⁴⁰⁰

This takes us to the final and probably the most obvious aspect of Devi’s critical irrealist writing: the absence or non-death of the Naxalite/insurgent figure in the narratives. These novels are about the absences of the Naxalite/insurgent figures who have been made present through the thoughts and memories of their near and dear ones. Properly speaking, the main protagonists of the novels analysed in this chapter are Sujata and Kali; they are physically present in the narratives and it is through their quests that the Naxalite/insurgent figures appear. However, it is Brati and Bashai that these novels are truly about, and who take up most of the narrative space through memory-narrations. Devi chooses her titles very skilfully. *Mother of 1084* is a novel about a mother, Sujata, but the reader is left to wonder what *1084* stands for. When it is made clear that it is the number of Brati’s corpse, the focal point and the appeal of the title seem to shift from the mother to the corpse. She is no longer the mother of a human being, but of a dead body. When Brati was alive, he was enquiring and visionary. He asked uncomfortable questions of the bourgeois order, pointed fingers at the bitter truths and hidden guilt of the established society. Therefore, he was not allowed to live in this ‘rotten’ world, had to be killed and reduced to a number. This novel is about Brati’s life and political faith. But it is also about the number 1084.

³⁹⁸ Thus, not only do the narration and the role of the narrator become important in Devi, but the abundance of characters such as journalists, food officers, clerks, accountants, in short the bureaucrats, appears to be significant as well, especially in relation to postcolonial modernity and the periphery.

³⁹⁹ Devi, *Bashai*, p. 41.

⁴⁰⁰ Neil Lazarus, ‘Epilogue: The Pterodactyl of History?’, *Textual Practice*, 27.3 (2013), 523-36 (p. 528).

Perhaps it is important here to add that although the narrator describes Brati as soft, sincere, curious, and determined, Brati's actual physical details are never communicated to us. We read of the various scars on his chest, the clotting of cold and dark red blood on his neck, and his mutilated face, from which, as the *dom* (carrier of the deadbodies) at the morgue says, Sujata would not be able to identify him. Note the passage here:

There were three bullet holes on his body, one on the chest, one on the stomach, one on the throat. Blue holes. The bullets had been aimed upon close range. The skin around the holes was blue. The cordite had left its burns. Chocolate-coloured blood. The cordite had scaled the skin around the hole to leave it parched and cracked into hollow rings [...] Brati's face battered and smashed by the blunt edge of a sharp, heavy weapon. [...] Sujata bent down to take a closer look at the face. She would have liked to caress his face with her fingers. She would have liked to call him by his name, Brati, Brati, and run her fingers over his face. But there was not an inch of skin left smooth and clear to bear the touch of her fingers. It was all raw flesh, all battered and smashed'.⁴⁰¹

Not only is the face unidentifiable, Devi's narration here, alternating between the emotions of a suffering mother and an objective reporter-like narratorial voice, makes the aspects of state torture and motherly pain strikingly poignant. There is no face left. Sujata has to rather identify him through his birthmarks. There is a suggestion here that the body may not be Brati's. The corpse in the title of the novel carries this feeling of absent presence. It could be argued that the novel is about 1084 and not about Brati, son of Sujata. It is through the State's dictates and a coercive approval from Brati's mother that 1084 becomes Brati. There is no doubt that Brati was killed in the police encounter, and it is to show the brutality of police torture that Brati's character has been developed in a particular way. But this does not invalidate the idea that the corpse could be anyone's, that this is a novel about a corpse, about the reductive transformation of life into corpses during the Naxalite period. It is a novel about a number, about how some dreaming youths and their struggles were reduced to a matter of numbering, of how they were inhumanly killed, dehumanised and quantified before their corpses were set on fire. At the same time, if we think of Brati's corpse as a kind of 'every corpse' that testifies to state violence, the withholding of identity also becomes a gesture of refusing the power that comes with this violence. That is,

⁴⁰¹ Devi, *Mother*, p. 11.

anonymity here enacts an oppositional possibility while testifying to accumulated state power. The novel's title, therefore, is bitterly critical of the state and its inhuman acts.

This anti-statist element is also present in the other novel, *Operation? – Bashai Tudu*. The word 'operation' stands for 'a strategic movement of troops, ships, etc., for military action'.⁴⁰² In this novel, 'operation' suggests Bashai's various operations/acts of jotedar-killing. That these acts require military discipline, training, and acumen are amply indicated through Bashai's successful guerilla operations, pointing also at the fuller meaning of the term 'subaltern' in the peripheral context. At the same time, the use of the word also has a predominant state-based meaning, especially if we remember that there have also been four operations from the state, by the police and the army, to kill Bashai. Indeed, the novel ends with another military operation for him. A military operation is generally undertaken when the state considers a situation a socio-political crisis and wants to quell it through repressive force. The element of crisis is read in such a way that it becomes impossible to see the point from the other way round. The mainland and the tribal, as Devi put it, are always parallel; there is no understanding, no meeting point. In *Bashai*, Bashai is the crisis incarnate. The crisis is that he does not die, despite being identified several times as having been killed. A military operation is undertaken to confirm that Bashai, the peripheral, insurgent, harmful element for the mainstream, is dead. We know from the conclusion that Bashai will not be found and so there will have to be more operations. What is notable here is the use of the interrogative mark after the word 'operation' in the title. Is Devi unable to believe that there can be an entire military operation just to capture and kill Bashai? Why does the state need an 'operation' for this? Consider also the novel's title in its entirety. Bashai is nowhere in the narrative, and, like Brati, he is also the creation of Kali's memories and could easily be the figment of his imagination. There are things that Kali remembers of Bashai and there are things that the narrator tells us. Bashai's character is a creation of thoughts, memories, and possibilities. Nothing is concrete here. Devi deliberately creates the transient, ephemeral figure of Bashai. Kali and others recognise Bashai not through his body and face, which have been mutilated by the police and army beyond recognition, but by the gesture of chocking the air through his fingers. Consider the conversation between a tribal, Sodan from

⁴⁰² 'Operation', *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, University of Warwick Library Database <<http://www.oed.com.pugwash.lib.warwick.ac.uk/>> [accessed 16 Jan, 2017].

Pataalkundi who has been called to the Bakuli police station to identify Bashai's corpse after his 'second' death. The Superintendent of Police asks:

'What are you saying?'

'It's Bashai Tudu.'

'Whom did you identify then at the Jagula hospital last time? Eh?'

'Bashai.'

'What do you mean? Do you take it for a joke?'

'No, babu, I am not joking. The one we saw last time didn't have anything you could call a face. The rest of the body looked like Bashai's; so I said, it was Bashai. The one you show us now has no face either, the body is riddled with bullets. When our Bashai was in a rage, he would ring the neck of the air with his two hands. He used to ring it and this one too did the same. Tell us, babu, when there's nothing that can be called a face, and the man was seen wringing the neck of the air with his hands before his death, shouldn't we say that it was Bashai?'⁴⁰³

Again, the matter of state torture is poignantly presented. The mutilation of the face suggests the hatred the state agents carry for the insurgents. It also indicates the violent and coherent effort by the state to obliterate an insurgent's identity and the possibilities of his/her memorialisation. But also note the element of guessing and hypothesis in the act of identification. As with Brati's corpse, nobody knows for sure if this is the corpse of Bashai. It is the signs and marks that ascribe meaning to the body or to the concept that Bashai stands for. In Bashai's case, it could also be argued that the tribal-peasants have launched a uniform counter-strategy against state violence: if the state mutilates an insurgent's face, they can decide not to identify the insurgent. In this way, the fear of the peripheral insurgent and of insurgency in general will continue to haunt the state. The title, thus, in these two different readings of operation makes a dialectical relation of state violence and tribal insurgency (also for *Mother* of motherly sympathy and love, and of state cruelty).

This dialectical relation of reality and unreality in the postcolonial, peripheral context is best understood in the episode where after a long talk with Bashai about caste and babu leadership, Kali broods, 'Bashai was now a strange continent. But a

⁴⁰³ Devi, *Bashai*, p. 112.

continent that one could not attack, explore or colonize'.⁴⁰⁴ Just before these remarks, Kali has repeated realisations that the Communist Party has become a system of profiteering and power mongering.⁴⁰⁵ There are moments that Devi uses the words 'Party' and 'Administration' interchangeably to suggest that the Party is a giant incomprehensible and mysterious Administrative system in the eyes of which Kali,⁴⁰⁶ Bashai,⁴⁰⁷ the local Sub Inspector in search of Bashai,⁴⁰⁸ and the agricultural labourers⁴⁰⁹ are all 'expendable,' insignificant, and replaceable bodies, like cogs in a machine. The system works mysteriously and can make anyone a sacrificial body – which pushes Kali to think that this is an unreal world he lives in: 'he was haunted by a sense of unreality [...] would it be wrong to deduce that the Party and the *Establishment* had the same disdainful *attitude* towards the common cadres? But the Party and *Establishment* were supposed to be antagonists'.⁴¹⁰ This is not a unique realisation for Kali. The institutionalisation of revolution in the aftermath of decolonisation by the Marxist parties, and the sense of despair in politics and society that it had created, can be found across postcolonial writings in the seventies and eighties, in the novels of Carlos Fuentes, Ayi Kwei Armah, Meja Mwangi, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, Debo Kotun, Pepetela and others.⁴¹¹ Many of these writers, notably Pepetela, render through 'irrealist' narratives the postcolonial society's transition to a market economy and the bourgeois politics of the Left.⁴¹² Devi is acutely conscious of this transformation of the established Left, and tells us that Kali and a new government collector find the world 'Kafkaesque'.⁴¹³ The reference to Kafka, which reminds us of

⁴⁰⁴ Devi, *Bashai*, p. 29.

⁴⁰⁵ Ibid, pp. 35-36.

⁴⁰⁶ Ibid, p. 37.

⁴⁰⁷ Ibid, p. 26.

⁴⁰⁸ Ibid, p. 11.

⁴⁰⁹ Ibid, p. 141.

⁴¹⁰ Ibid, p. 37; italics in original.

⁴¹¹ The phrase, 'institutionalization of revolution' has a very long history, for instance in Mexico where the ruling party after 1910 called itself the 'Institutional Revolution Party' (Partido Revolucionario Institucional). Much Mexican and more generally Latin American literature in the 20th C has duly criticised what Vargas Llosa, for one, called the 'perfect dictatorship' of the PRI. See the novels of Carlos Fuentes, most notably, *The Death of Artemio Cruz*, trans. by Sam Hileman (London: Secker and Warburg, 1977); for readings from postcolonial Africa, see Ayi Kwei Armah, *The Beautiful Ones are Not Yet Born* (London: Heinemann, 1969); Meja Mwangi, *Kill Me Quick* (London: Heinemann, 1974); Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, *Petals of Blood* (London: Heinemann, 1986); Debo Kotun, *Abiku* (California: Nepotis, 1998).

⁴¹² See specifically Pepetela's novel, *The Return of the Water Spirit*, trans. by Luís R Mitras (Oxford: Heinemann, 2002).

⁴¹³ Devi, *Bashai*, p. 97.

the unreal world of bureaucracy and political power in *The Trial* or the mysterious injunctions of law and torture in 'In the Penal Colony', not only makes a compelling case for how administration as an abstract and rigorous system of decisions and injunctions tortures the clueless human subject in the postcolonial world, but also reminds us of the essentially unchanging nature and mechanisms of bureaucracy and political parties (from Kafka's imperialist Europe in the interwar years to the current postcolonial conditions in Bengal).⁴¹⁴ Against this haunted, incomprehensible, unreal world of Party system and higher-caste-ruled administration, Bashai's words and actions appear to be small but potent acts of transgression and rebellion. The reference above to Bashai as a 'strange continent' qualifies the long nature of colonialism: the multiple cases of colonisation of the most ancient settlers in India, the tribal people; by Hindu and Muslim leaders of various empires; by the colonial British who implemented the Criminal Tribes Act, and the colonial native landlords for rents and crops; and now by postcolonial India which exploits the peripheral tribal characters in the name of modernisation and development, and has alienated and cornered them - an aspect that many of Devi's tribal fiction repeatedly brings up, most notably the long short story 'Pterodactyl'. But Bashai is beyond colonisation now as the administration cannot catch him, as he dies only to come back again in arms, waging war against the terrors of the police and the jotedars. If the administration and the Party are incomprehensible and mysterious in their workings, then, unlike Kafka's anti-heroes, Bashai has not submitted to a strange death, but has turned mysterious and impossible, coming back alive again and again from death and threatening the administration with a logic of unreality.⁴¹⁵ It is impossible to catch him because he is nowhere present by being present everywhere, like the resistance fighter Matigari ma Nijiruungi in Ngũgĩ

⁴¹⁴ See Kafka, *The Trial*, trans. by Willa and Edwin Muir (London: Secker and Warburg, 1945); 'In the Penal Colony', in *The Metamorphosis, In the Penal Colony and Other Stories*, trans. by Joachim Neugroschel (New York: Scribner, 2000).

⁴¹⁵ It should be mentioned here that Devi has repeatedly used the trope of the tribal as the unreal or ghostly character. This trope seems to serve a particular point for her. The tribals are peripheral characters whom the colonial and postcolonial state have systematically repressed for their coercive extracting/occupying of the land and jungle-based resources. For this purpose, which is intricately associated with racial and caste-based othering and oppression, the tribals have long been represented by the colonial state as primal, pagan, savage, criminal, and barbaric. The postcolonial state, as we have seen, has inherited many of these tendencies and strategies. Devi uses this representative image of the tribal by the state in order to wrestle out a counter-representation where the 'non-existent' or the ghostly is constitutively frightening for the state through its vague but perpetual presence. For references, see the story 'Strange Children', in Kalpana Bardhan, *Of Women, Outcastes, Peasants, and Rebels: A Selection of Bengali Short Stories* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1990), pp. 229-241; and 'Mahadu: Ekti Rupkatha' [Mahadu: A Fairytale] in *Mahasweta Devi: Srestha Galpo* (Kolkata: Dey's, 2004), pp. 292-299.

wa Thiong'o's novel *Matigari* (1986) who survives several bullet wounds and then escapes from jail, giving birth to a myth of the non-death of the insurgent.⁴¹⁶

In a recent reading of Devi's tribal stories, Filippo Menozzi tells us that Devi's works contain an 'unreconciled tension between the representational and allegorical imperatives'.⁴¹⁷ Though Devi allegorises historical violence on the tribal through her fictions, she also guards against an essentialist reading of these fictions by undermining the conventional representational means of realism, by withholding the secret or the unwritten in the tribal-social. Menozzi posits that the real in Devi should be not only located in the historical-social, but also 'detected and decoded in the literary work itself, in its figurative texture. In other words the question of realism is also the question of figuration'.⁴¹⁸ Devi's figurative use of realism lies in the use of the corpse or the figure of an undying tribal, or in the metaphors of scars, signs, and the non-colonisation of identity. At the same time, reading this allegorical, figurative aspect without properly historicising the context would be giving undue privilege to the textual. The code of Devi's writing in the final instance is that of the incommensurability between the techniques of representation and the subjects of representation (i.e. the tribal) which is precisely the ground for a positive ethical move – that of solidarity between the writer/reader and her subject. Through Bashai's absence proper, Devi indicates the purpose of the struggle, that the Bashais will never succumb to the physical and discursive pressures of the state, that they will use guerrilla tactics and their never-ending fighting spirit to threaten the state. Bashai, through such use, becomes a figurative being, a concept more than a human figure; he is a crisis incarnate because there is no end to the characters like Bashai. They will continue to appear and fight the state. In this sense, operation becomes an odd word (hence the interrogation mark) because the state will never be able to capture Bashai the concept – epitomised by Bashai's absence in the cave – but nonetheless will have to continue to search for Bashai. The implication of the state in the title of these texts makes it clear that the fate of the state and that of the insurgent, the marginalised, or the peripheral-figurative are entangled. As Alaknanda Bagchi writes in a reading of nationalism in the novel, the non-death of Bashai is a reminder to the metropolis that

⁴¹⁶ Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, *Matigari*, trans. by Wuagui wa Goro (Oxford: Heinemann, 1989).

⁴¹⁷ Filippo Menozzi, *Postcolonial Custodianship: Cultural and Literary Inheritance* (London: Routledge, 2014), p. 67.

⁴¹⁸ *Ibid*, p.67.

the history of the displaced remains entangled with that of the metropolis, and that like the corpse of Bashai, it keeps resurfacing: “the ghostly”, “the terrifying”, “and the unaccountable” Bashai keeps surfacing to “remind” the metropolis that he will not be “forgotten”.⁴¹⁹ Bashai’s non-death subverts the possibility of any homogeneous nationalist discourse: ‘these representations constitute narrative(s) of nation(s) that pry open the closures of the national discourse, compelling the forces in power to “remember” what they would rather “forget”’.⁴²⁰ As Devi draws the narrative to a close, she makes this point about remembrance and struggle clear through words of hope and optimism in the resistance of the weak: ‘There would come a day when he would wring the air and give it a body, wring the darkness to turn it to fire. The night the sixth Bashai buried the fifth and left – how did he look? Let him be very beautiful, very beautiful, very young. Very [...] very [...] very’.⁴²¹ These are powerful evocations of the beauty of resistance against oppressive regimes. The beauty in the indefatigable spirit of not dying is capable of giving birth to a day when the dying bodies will finally be unified and a singular body of tribal self and power will be born.

This use of irrealist elements, including experimentation with narrative time, an academic style of writing, and narratorial criticism, has often confused critics. Apart from Menozzi’s reading of figural realism, Minoli Salgado finds a ‘surface realism’ in Devi which is ‘destabilized by mythic and satiric configurations [...] [and] a mixture of folk dialects and urbane Bengali, slang and Shakespeare, Hindu mythology and quotations from Marx’.⁴²² In another study, Parama Roy thinks that Devi’s use of animal allegories, spectres, and non-human figures reveals the limits of realism because the ‘suffering of the poor exceeds any available language of social realism’.⁴²³ These are all helpful commentaries, but I think these critics tend to view Devi’s cross-fertilisation of genres and styles as surface-realist, non-realist, or anti-realist. What I have argued here is that in order to represent exploitations in the periphery and to give the caste-based or gendered subaltern or peripheral insurgent/Naxalite figure his or her voice, it is important to use a narrative that teaches

⁴¹⁹ Alaknanda Bagchi, ‘Conflicting Nationalism: The Voice of the Subaltern in Mahasweta Devi’s *Bashai Tudu*’, *Tulsa Studies in Women’s Literature*, 15.1 (1996), pp. 41-50, (p.46).

⁴²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 48.

⁴²¹ Devi, *Bashai*, pp. 147-48.

⁴²² Minoli Salgado, ‘Tribal Stories, Scribal Worlds: Mahasweta Devi and the Unreliable Translator’, *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 35.1 (2000), 131-46. (p. 131).

⁴²³ Parama Roy, *Alimentary Tracts: Appetites, Aversions, and the Postcolonial* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), p. 23.

us, her middle-class readers, and asks us to patiently listen to the subaltern. Devi uses her protagonists Sujata and Kali strikingly well to situate these aspects, especially through the quest element – the idea that these middle-class members would require a physical and psychological quest to understand the problems sympathetically. The quests have not been materially successful, but they are instrumental in engineering protest, resistance, and hope in the questers. Through such techniques, Devi fractures the class-based realist narrative so that the subaltern's voice can be heard, that the century-long history of exploitation of the subaltern and the Adivasi can be foregrounded, that the difficulty of recuperating the tribal or the peripheral (Naxalite) character's history can be highlighted, and that middle-class complacency can be pointed out and criticised. Through the failed quest, then, Devi appears to quest realism itself, making it a form which, much like the act of living in the peripheries of the postcolonial world, is always in search of completeness.

Nabarun Bhattacharya's Urban Fantastic Tales

Such innovative and committed writing can hardly be found in the Naxalite fiction written in the immediate aftermath of the event. Experimentation with form and style reappears in the late 1990s, but the critical voice of Devi is mostly missing here. Instead, there is a cynical tone, interspersed with disillusionment and uncertainty. Sandipan Chattopadhyay's *Ami o Banabihari (Banabihari and I)*,⁴²⁴ which won the Sahitya Akademi Award, is a powerful example in this context. This novel is about the character Ami (which in Bangla means I), who in his early life was a Naxalite and joined the CPI (M-L) in breaking away from the CPI (M) and participated in the annihilation campaigns in the villages. Thirty years after the 'revolution', in 1997, he now appears as an old, fragile, disillusioned, mentally challenged human being. Banabihari, who had been his friend, remained in the CPI (M) and became a politburo member, making a huge fortune out of party politics. The novel moves back and forth in time in order to give us fragments of the aftereffects of the movement – the entrenchment of the bureaucratic and class-based interests in the CPI (M), the rise of corrupt party members, the decline of the Naxalite movement and its revival in current times, and so on. What is interesting in the narration is that, notwithstanding the outline I have presented above, it is never clear if Ami and Banabihari are two different

⁴²⁴ Chattopadhyay, 2000.

characters. The point that the author makes here through a dense and non-linear style of narration is that political power makes it inevitable for any Party, Marxist or otherwise, to bend to the illusions of individual profit, sacrificing the principles of collective and ideological benefit. Though Banabihari is killed in the end, this bleak realisation remains intact, pushing us to ask if Ami of the CPI (M-L) would have done the same thing if he were in power.

Raghab Bandyopadhyay's *Jarnal Sottor (Journal of the 70s)*⁴²⁵ is another notable example from this period. Like Devi's novel, it follows a compartmentalised narrative in which the narrator writes a journal of the 1970s foregrounding the Naxalbari movement. Bandyopadhyay chooses to focus on a narrower area of a city, where a group of young people, influenced by world-scale historical and contemporary events, and by Mazumdar's political speeches and writings, attempt to overthrow the existing socio-economic and cultural order for a socialist cause. In such a historical formation, the movement and its cause lose importance and appear as immature, sudden, and meaningless. The narrative parts, in their narrowness, fail to relate Bandyopadhyay's ironic and cynical voice to the larger historical contexts and realisations. Other notable examples include the jail narratives of Meenakshi Sen and of the Dalit writer Manoranjan Byapari, the historical fiction of Kinnar Roy, the travelogues and non-fiction of Sudeep Chakravarti and Rahul Pandita, and the recent English-language novels by Jhumpa Lahiri and Neel Mukherjee.⁴²⁶

In the works of Nabarun Bhattacharya (1948-2014), the movement and its aftermath receive a powerful treatment. Son of Mahasweta Devi and Bijon Bhattacharya, Bhattacharya grew up in the 1960s Bengal under political violence and the Naxalite crisis.⁴²⁷ His first published story, 'Bhashan', was based on the Naxalite event.⁴²⁸ It is about a madman who was killed during the Naxalite bombings, but who

⁴²⁵ Bandyopadhyay, 2000.

⁴²⁶ Meenakshi Sen, *Jeler Bhetor Jel [A Jail within a Jail]* (Kolkata: Karigar, 2014); Manoranjan Byapari, *Batashe Baruder Gandho [The Smell of Gunpowder in the Air]* (Kolkata: Raktakarobi, 2013); Kinnar Roy, *Mrityu Kusum [Death Bud]* (Kolkata: Dey's, 2007); Sudeep Chakravarti, *Red Sun: Travels in Naxalite Country* (New Delhi: Penguin, 2008); Rahul Pandita, *Hello, Bastar: The Untold Story of India's Maoist Movement* (Chennai: Tranquebar, 2011); Jhumpa Lahiri, *The Lowland* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013); Neel Mukherjee, *The Lives of Others* (London: Chatto and Windus, 2014).

⁴²⁷ For a critical introduction to Bhattacharya's life and works, see 'Nabarun Bhattacharya', ed. by Sourit Bhattacharya and Arka Chattopadhyay, *Sanglap: Journal of Literary and Critical Inquiry*, 2.1 Sup (2015), 1-198 (pp. 1-15).

⁴²⁸ 'Bhashan' ['Immersion'] was published in the magazine *Parichay* in 1968 and later collected in Nabarun Bhattacharya, *Shrestho Galpo*, ed. by Rajib Choudhuri (Kolkata: Dey's, 2006), pp. 21-24.

now speaks of his puzzling death through his dead body. Bhattacharya focuses not on the heroics of the movement, but rather on how a madman and other marginalised figures become expendable casualties during the Naxalite violence. His writings would go on to highlight these characters, the marginalised and insignificant ones in the postcolonial consumerist societies, who are made victims, rendered invisible, or turned into criminals.⁴²⁹ In many of his fictions, his narrators call these characters ‘lumpens’ or what in Marxist classification is known as the lumpenproletariat. In *The Communist Manifesto*, Marx and Engels identify a section of society as ‘the dangerous class’, which ‘may here and there be swept in the movement by a proletarian revolution; its conditions of life however prepare it far more for the part of a bribed tool of reactionary intrigue’.⁴³⁰ However, in *Class Struggles in France, 1848-50*, Marx notes that this class, despite its criminal involvement, is able to do the most ‘heroic and the most exalted sacrifices’ for both revolutionary and reactionary causes.⁴³¹ Later, Communist leaders and Marxist intellectuals such as Mao Zedong and Frantz Fanon recognise the revolutionary potential in the category. Mao thought the lumpenproletariat ‘were able to fight bravely but apt to be destructive’ so they need to be ‘properly guided’,⁴³² while Fanon states that ‘any movement for freedom ought to give its fullest attention to this lumpenproletariat’. Since this is an uneducated, vulnerable, and weak class, ‘If this available reserve of human effort is not immediately recognized by the forces of rebellion, it will find itself fighting as hired soldiers side by side with the colonial troops’.⁴³³ It has an especially important role and meaning in the postcolonial context. Sumanta Banerjee, in his introduction to the translation of Mahasweta Devi’s short stories in *Bait*, tells us how this class fraction historically evolved into an underworld mafia in Bengal in the 1960s, helping the

⁴²⁹ The Naxalite story ‘Khnochor,’ for instance, is about how a lower-class secret informer lives his life in fear of getting shot by a Naxalite or exploded by the Naxalite use of ‘Molotov Cocktail’. The graphic description of violence related with the Naxalite events is striking here. Another story, ‘Halal Jhanda’ [‘Faithful Flag’], describes in a slow-motion effect how a bomb explodes and its splinters wound and mutilate the bodies of the small time crooks. For a critical introduction to Nabarun’s works, see ‘Nabarun Bhattacharya’, ed. by Sourit Bhattacharya and Arka Chattopadhyay, *Sanglap: Journal of Literary and Critical Inquiry*, 2.1 Sup (2015), 1-198.

⁴³⁰ Karl Marx and Frederic Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* (London: Penguin, 1992), p. 14.

⁴³¹ Karl Marx, *Class Struggle in France, 1848-1850*, p. 23, Marxist.Org <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1850/class-struggles-france/> [accessed 18 Jan, 2017].

⁴³² Mao Zedong, ‘Analysis of the Classes in Chinese Society’, in *Selected Works of Mao Tse Tung, Vol I* (Peking: Foreign Language Press, 1965), p. 19.

⁴³³ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (London: Penguin, 1967), p. 109.

Congress and Left parties to hold power.⁴³⁴ This section of society came into being in the aftermath of the Bengal famine, which left the urban poor with increasingly volatile conditions. For survival reasons, they provided the ruling class with the muscle-power it sought: ‘the troika (politician-gangster-police) received the boost in the 1960s and 1970s when the ruling politicians and the administration sought the help of the underworld to destroy the Naxalite movement and eliminate its peasant and student cadres’.⁴³⁵ But it was not only used by the police and the bourgeoisie in power. In his analysis of the Naxalbari movement, Banerjee also notes that the lumpenproletariat was used by the CPI (M-L) as well for assassinating the police and the police’s informers:

In West Bengal, the lumpenproletariat’s rootlessness and affinity to the underworld made it responsible to at least one aspect of the CPI (M-L) urban strategy – assassination of police and informers. In 1970-71, the political actions of the CPI (M-L) cadres and the settling of private scores by the city’s lumpenproletariat often shaded off into each other. In some areas, notorious gangsters infiltrated into the CPI (M-L) organizations, sometimes at the behest of the police, and were partly responsible for bringing discredit to the movement.⁴³⁶

This dual use gave the lumpenproletariat a negative identity. They were seen as opportunistic and reactionary. Since the section belonged to the category of the urban poor, the entire section of the urban poor ended up being identified as a ‘criminal’ or ‘dangerous’ class in the post-independence period.⁴³⁷ Bhattacharya’s stories capture the everyday life and struggles of this class of people, which includes gangsters, spies, thieves, beggars, sweepers, loafers, prostitutes, and others. Bhattacharya does not necessarily criminalise the class fraction, nor does he extol their virtues for organised Left politics. He shows how they live on a hand-to-mouth basis, how they have evolved over time as a marginalised and neglected category, and how there could be

⁴³⁴ Sumanta Banerjee, ‘Introduction’, *Bait: Four Stories/Mahasweta Devi*, trans. by Sumanta Banerjee (Kolkata: Seagull, 2004), pp. vii-xxii (pp. xii-xiv).

⁴³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. xiii.

⁴³⁶ Banerjee, *Simmering*, p. 54.

⁴³⁷ Sumanta Banerjee, ‘West Bengal Today: An Anticipatory Post-Mortem’, *Economic and Political Weekly*, 25.33 (1990), pp. 1812-16; Banerjee, *Bait*, vii-xx; Romesh Thapar, ‘Explosions and Stirrings’, *Economic and Political Weekly*, 17.44 (1982), 1763; ‘A Dangerous Edge to Our Politics’, *Economic and Political Weekly*, 19.10 (1984), 407.

a case of unified ‘warfare’ and resistance in them against the bourgeois and the repressive machineries of the state.

In his later fiction, Bhattacharya’s lumpen characters take on fantastic, parodic, and revolutionary forms.⁴³⁸ *Harbart*, for instance, is a novel about an orphan who is physically abused and cannot talk properly, but who later discovers super-human powers of talking to the dead and then challenges the Rationalist Association when he is threatened with exposure. In *Kāngāl Mālshāt*, fyatarus (lower-class people who can fly) and choktars (people from the same class who practise black magic) plot mysterious warfare against the bourgeoisie and the state machineries because their demands have not been met. These fictions are urban fantastic tales in terms of mode. The urban fantasy mode includes novels that employ supernatural elements in a contemporary urban setting, such as Mikhail Bulgakov’s *The Master and Margarita* (1997; written between 1928 and 1934)⁴³⁹, Tim Powers’ *The Anubis Gates* (1983), and Emma Bull’s *War for the Oaks* (1987).⁴⁴⁰ Fantasy scholar Alexander Irvine writes that, ‘The elements common to all urban fantasies [are] – a city in which supernatural events occur, the presence of prominent characters who are artists or musicians or scholars, [and] the redeployment of previous fantastic and folkloric topoi in unfamiliar

⁴³⁸ In his earlier fictions, the characters include: Kalmon and Moglai, two small-time thieves (‘Kalmon and Moglai’); Foyara, a prostitute who has a mysterious disease (‘Foyara’r Jonyo Duschinta’ [‘Anxiety for Foyara’]); a poor and failed writer who wants to write a story about a blind cat in a hotel he stayed in the past (‘Andho Beral’ [‘Blind Cat’]); four dead-body bearers who are deaf and are carrying a mysterious corpse through the heart of the city (‘4+1’); a middle-aged man who fears that he will be killed soon for some mysterious reasons (‘Amar Kono Bhoy Nei Toh’ [‘I Don’t Have to Fear, Do I?’]), etc. These characters are culled from everyday life and can be seen inhabiting the Third World postcolonial urban space on the streets and footpaths, in the dark and forbidden alleys, in the whore houses, morgues, police-stations, and in the slums. They are everywhere, and are an indispensable force of labour for the state, which Partha Chatterjee has influentially termed the ‘political society’. See Partha Chatterjee, *The Politics of the Governed: Reflections on Popular Politics in Most of the World* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), pp. 53-80. For these stories, see Bhattacharya, *Srestho Galpo*; some of these stories have been translated in the Nabarun Bhattacharya edition in the journal, *Sanglap*. See ‘Nabarun Bhattacharya’, *Sanglap*, 2.1 sup.

⁴³⁹ Bulgakov, *The Master and Margarita*, trans. by Richard Pervear and Larissa Volokhonsky (London: Penguin, 1997); it should be mentioned here that Bhattacharya has repeatedly spoken about his inspiration from Bulgakov, Nikolai Gogol, and other Russian urban fantastic writers. Considering that these writers were writing either under Czarist Russia or during the early Stalinist orthodoxy, and used ‘modernist’ and fabulist elements widely in their works to critique the current sociopolitical dispensation, Bhattacharya’s use of these elements indicates a genealogical connection here. On this, see the special issue on Bulgakov in Bhattacharya’s edited journal, *Bhashabandhan III* (Kolkata: Bhashabandhan, 2012).

⁴⁴⁰ Tim Powers, *The Anubis Gates* (New York: Ace Books, 1983); Emma Bull, *War for the Oaks* (New York: Ace Books, 1987). This has become a fast-growing genre, mixing often with the series-based teen fiction or adult fantasy works such as Suzanne Collins’ trilogy, *The Hunger Games* (New York: Scholastic Press, 2010).

contexts'.⁴⁴¹ While two of the other elements (the city and the fantastic) appear in Bhattacharya's fiction, there is no artist or musician, supposedly from the privileged classes. Instead, the fantastic characters here are all from the lower classes for whom, unlike for the upper and middle classes, their supernatural powers do not appear to be alien, other-worldly, or abnormal, but rather as part of the everyday cultural belief system. These features point to two specific uses of the fantastic in Bhattacharya: that the fantastic has a strategic, class-based meaning; and that it is related with the 'normal-rational' world.⁴⁴² Fantasy, as both Tzvetan Todorov and Rosemary Jackson⁴⁴³ remind us, is a subversive tool through which the bourgeois social order and its arrangement of mimetic realism/literature are challenged. Bhattacharya uses the fantastic for this purpose, but also for a more rooted class-based meaning. The *fyatarus* and *choktars* work as domestic helpers, sweepers, barbers, salesmen, and in other capacities – in short, the workforce needed by the urban bourgeoisie. They are a constant presence in the consumerist world, but because of their marginal class positions and low purchase capabilities, they are identified as negligible/marginal actors on the metropolitan-consumerist stage. By allowing these people the power of the supernatural and the fantastic, Bhattacharya turns them into recognisable bodies and agents. The use of the fantastic appears particularly important because it is the alterity in their quotidian, mimetic self,⁴⁴⁴ and their empowered presence through 'irrational' means in the space of the 'normal-rational', that puzzle and terrify the bourgeoisie. There is a clear suggestion here that, despite the state's shameful erasure

⁴⁴¹ Alexander Irvine, 'Urban Fantasy', in *The Cambridge Companion to Fantasy Literature*, ed. by Edward James and Farah Mendlesohn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 200-13, (p. 201).

⁴⁴² Farah Mendlesohn calls this kind of fantasy immersive fantasy. She argues that the fantastic has many forms, such as the quest-portal, the intrusive, the liminal, and the immersive; it is in the immersive category that the fantastic is deployed within the 'normal-rational' as a component of the everyday and the normalised. See Farah Mendlesohn, *Rhetorics of Fantasy* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2008), pp. 59-113.

⁴⁴³ Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, trans. by Richard Howard (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1975); Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* (London: Routledge, 1988).

⁴⁴⁴ I am using the concept of alterity from Michael Taussig. In *Mimesis and Alterity*, through an ethnography of the healing practices of the Cuna Indians and through a reading of Walter Benjamin, Taussig writes that mimesis, which is the process of copying from an original idea (or a prototype), includes the concept of contact and anticipation. It is a relationship with the Other, and constitutes its being from knowledges and values generated from the acts of communion with the Other. He defines alterity as 'a relationship, not a thing in itself, and in this [the Cuna Indians'] case an actively mediated colonial relationship meeting contradictory and conflicting European expectations of what constitutes Indianness'. See *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses* (New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 130.

of these people from the public gaze, they will fight back in their own ways, through the mobilisation of their empowering cultural practices and through their long histories of militant (peasant) politics. In this portrayal, Bhattacharya's work reminds us of China Miéville's use of the fantastic, especially in such works as *Iron Council* and *The City & The City*, where Miéville's characters employ supernatural powers for class warfare against a bureaucratic, biopolitical meta-body in the attempt to build a socialist future.⁴⁴⁵ This strongly political and critical nature appears to distinguish the mode from magical realism, which also deploys the quotidian existence of the magical with the real in everyday society, but in which the element of criticality is either missing or dominantly folded within its figurative devices.⁴⁴⁶ In Bhattacharya or in Miéville, the characters using the supernatural and the fantastic are forceful, vocal, and critical of society's norms. Moreover, the narrator himself/herself is also critical and sarcastic of establishment politics and media. As in *Devi*, he or she enters forcefully in every chapter and provides bitter, critical commentary on particular social norms or the dominant consumerist tendencies of the middle classes. These structural and narratorial interruptions echo Jameson's use of 'modernistic realism' and more forcefully point to Michael Löwy's notion of critical irrealism. Löwy reminds us that irrealism is not anti-realism, but rather a critical review of realism where the limitations within realism's representational strategies are challenged. This challenge is not 'a rational argument, a systematic opposition, or an explicit discourse; more often, in irrealist art, it takes the form of protest, outrage, disgust, anxiety, or *angst*'.⁴⁴⁷ I will show how Bhattacharya's *angst* and outrage at the Communist government's rationalist-consumerist drives in post-Naxalism Bengal is represented through the critical use of the supernatural and fantastic powers by the urban poor. Through these characters and their militant politics, Bhattacharya tells us that Naxalism is not dead.

⁴⁴⁵ See China Miéville, *Iron Council* (London: Del Rey, 2004); *The City & The City* (London: Pan, 2011).

⁴⁴⁶ In scholarly research, magical realism and the fantastic are often interchangeable in terms of the subversive nature of form [Sharon Seiber, 'Magic Realism', in *The Cambridge Companion to Fantasy*, ed. by Edward James and Farah Mendlesohn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 167-78]. Subversion here is read as challenging and undermining the dominant version of truth. Where I think Bhattacharya's work is different is in his strategic use of the fantastic, its clear engagement with and critique of established forms, and its lower-class-based political eruptions. For a reading of the critical strain in the magic realist form and its sustained erasure for commercial purposes, see: Christopher Warnes, *Magical Realism and the Postcolonial Novel: Between Faith and Irreverence* (London: Palgrave, 2009), pp. 7-12; and Sharae Deckard, 'Peripheral Realism, Millennial Capitalism, and Roberto Bolaño's 2666', *Modern Language Quarterly*, 73.3 (2012), 351-72.

⁴⁴⁷ Löwy, p. 196. I will discuss the use of the term magical realism more broadly in the next chapter.

Rather, it has been adapted differently to suit the current nature of political and ideological struggles. He looks back to the Naxalite decades⁴⁴⁸ and produces a caricature of the Naxalite rebel, whose parodic and vulgar humour and political demands indicate how the Communist leaders/revolutionaries have degenerated into selfish consumerists in the postcolonial period. The militant acts also revive the Naxalite ideology of resistance against the state's hyper-rationalising and repressive-modernising drives. In this capacity, urban space becomes the most significant trope for registering the political energies of the fantastic. Following Rashmi Varma, I will read this nature of the urban postcolonial space as 'conjunctural'. Varma analyses the relations, imprints, and inheritance of imperial and colonial power structures in the literary-cultural registrations of spatial unevenness in postcolonial Bombay, Nairobi, and London. The postcolonial city, for her, needs to be understood as space that 'produces a critical combination of historical events, material bodies, structural forces, and representational economies that propel new constellations of domination and resistance, centres and peripheries, and the formation of the new political subjects'.⁴⁴⁹ I will show here how *Harbart* registers the critical combination of events, forces, economies, and cultures, and produces an uneven aesthetic through its dialectical use of the 'rational' and the 'irrational'. In the next section, I will argue that in *Kāngāl Mālshāt*, Nabarun Bhattacharya allows the urban poor and the subaltern to declare their empowered presence through irreal guerrilla warfare that includes wide-scale filth-making and defiling of postcolonial public space. This use of the urban fantastic mode in Bhattacharya, I will argue, helps us understand the composite nature of postcolonial urbanity (in the aftermath of Naxalism) and the tremendous political energies within realism.

⁴⁴⁸ Bhattacharya's creative and intellectual growth began in these decades. Apart from his stories, see his widely cited poem, 'E Mrityu Upotyoka Amar Desh Na' ['This Valley of Death is Not My Country'] (1973), for an understanding of his involvement with Naxalite politics, and his angry response to the state for its repressive violence and to the civil society for its numbness and negligence. These opening lines from the poem may give us a sense here: 'The father who fears identifying his son's corpse | I hate him much | The brother who is still normal and shameless | I hate him much | The teachers, scholars, poets, clerks | who do not ask for revenge | I hate them much [...] This valley of death is not my country | This executioner's roaring is not my country | This earth of bones and corpses is not my country | This bloody slaughterhouse is not my country' (Kolkata: Saptarshi Prakashan, 2004), pp. 11-12. My translation.

⁴⁴⁹ Rashmi Varma, *The Postcolonial City and Its Subjects: London, Nairobi, Bombay* (London: Routledge, 2012), p. 1.

Harbart and Spatial Unevenness

*Harbart*⁴⁵⁰ is the story of Harbart Sarkar. Born in a once-rich ‘babu’ (colonial gentry) family in Southern Calcutta and losing his parents as an infant, Harbart grows up lonely and friendless in his uncle’s house and is abused by his cousin, Dhanna-da. Living in his own world of reading ghost stories and séance and afterlife-related books, he develops a strange vocabulary and an isolated form of living, which brings him neglect and insults such as ‘freak’ or ‘crazy’ from street urchins and his neighbours. It is from his nephew Binu, who comes to live with Harbart’s family for higher studies in Calcutta, that he receives respect as a fellow human being for the first time. Binu dies in the Naxalite police violence, and a disturbed Harbart ‘discovers’ his superhuman powers of ‘conversations with the dead’ soon after that. Binu and his Naxalite involvement thus play a very marginal role in the narrative, but they are crucial for Harbart’s character transformation. Binu’s character is developed in fast brushstrokes. He is described very briefly in the fourth chapter as a studious, sensitive college boy who teaches young children in order to earn money and buys Harbart clothes from his earnings. He is inspired by Charu Mazumdar’s ‘clarion call’ for revolution.⁴⁵¹ The Barasat police’s massacre of the Naxalites on 19 November 1970 motivates him to join the CPI (M-L)’s revolutionary politics. He wants Harbart to read Mao Zedong’s *The Red Book* and to understand the beauty of sacrifice for a collective socialist cause, rather than to ‘waste time’ in the ‘nonsensical’ world of ghosts and religion.⁴⁵² This conversation between Binu and Harbart gives us some crucial insight into the ways in which Naxalism is figured in the novel:

Binu had given a different explanation to Harbart, who was interested in the afterworld.

What’s all that rubbish you read. It’s all fraud. Ridiculous. So-and-so died and came back as a ghost, such-and-such person became a spirit after death – every page is full of ghosts, have you ever seen one yourself? It’s not as though people haven’t died. Who knows how many have died in this house alone?

Does it have to be untrue just because I haven’t seen it?

⁴⁵⁰ *Harbart* (Kolkata: Dey’s, 1993) was published in 1993 and won the Sahitya Akademi Award, India’s most prestigious literary prize, in 1994. The novel has been translated twice into English. I am using the translation by Arunava Sinha (Chennai: Tranquebar, 2011).

⁴⁵¹ Ibid, p. 49.

⁴⁵² Ibid, p. 49.

No just you, no one has.

Then what about the planchette?

What about it? I've seen it myself in Berhampore.

You have? They came?

Why shouldn't they? The people themselves push the glass towards the letters or shake the pencil. But why blame you. As long as few people continue to fool millions of human beings into working till they die, as long as they cheat them, ghosts and your gods and goddesses and religion will all survive. Listen to this. (Binu opened a small book, turned its pages)

'Thousands of martyrs are embracing death as we watch, every living person's heart is agonised whenever we think of them, is there any interest that we cannot sacrifice, any error that we cannot rectify? [...]' Have you any idea who wrote this?

Harbart shook his head. He had no idea about any of this.

Mao Tse Tung.⁴⁵³

Binu is a rationalist. He does not believe in ghosts not only because no one has seen them, but also because he has 'seen' how a planchette (mediumship with spirits through devices on a wooden board) works, and so has seen how and to what effect ideology (ritual/religion) is produced. Nonetheless, there is a scientistic positivism underlying his dismissal of the supernatural. Note that he is also deeply moved by the aspect of the sacrificial. What he reads to Harbart is not the tactics of guerrilla warfare or the deplorable conditions of the peasants in China, but a particular passage in *The Red Book* which is entirely about the idealisation of collective death, an agonised apotheosis of the sacrificial. It seems that the drive towards death becomes more important for the Naxalite (exceeding Maoism here by some distance) than properly carrying out political plans and tactics for a sustained revolutionary politics.⁴⁵⁴ Harbart appears to be moved by Binu's revolutionary talk and starts helping him.⁴⁵⁵ It is however important to note that Bhattacharya's narrator does not speak of any growth of revolutionary or political consciousness in the character. Unlike Bashai who is

⁴⁵³ Ibid, pp. 48-49.

⁴⁵⁴ Nabarun's narrator does not tell us whether it is right or wrong to do so; he or she simply narrates the events and leaves the judgement to the reader.

⁴⁵⁵ 'One day Binu had sent Harbart with a good deal of money and a booklet of receipts with pictures of Mao Tse Tung and Lin Piao to one Bijay in the Lake Market area'. Ibid, p. 51.

politically educated, or Poran Porel who at least knows about the links between class and caste oppression and mocks the powers that be, Harbart appears to have no consciousness of any politics whatsoever. He helps Binu because he loves him, because he loves to imagine revolutionary death and sacrifice.⁴⁵⁶ On his deathbed, Binu whispers to Harbart about a diary kept behind the image of the goddess Kali in the prayer room.⁴⁵⁷ A few days later, Harbart tells the family about a dream in which Binu told him about this diary. The narrator does not tell us why Harbart decides to reveal this piece of information (whether there is any political motivation behind his declaration), and narrates in a linear fashion Harbart's joy in discovering the diary and the starting of his business, 'conversations with the dead'. The timing of this declaration is interesting. He declares this after the death of Binu, who taught him to imagine the beauty of the sacrificial, the afterlife of the martyrs, and the necessity of death for the revolutionary cause. Binu is the one who during his life fought the bourgeoisie, the educated middle and lower-middle classes and their reactionary forces and ideologies, and who challenged the police and its repressive power in seeking to establish a 'beautiful' world. The class and society Binu fought against are also the ones that have humiliated Harbart throughout his life. His declaration thus appears to be political in a particular way: enabled by Binu's invocation to revolutionary afterlife, Harbart, who has read about afterlife and the dead throughout these years, and has been termed crazy for his 'strange' vocabulary and behaviour, appears to make a different use out of it. He proclaims to know the afterlife and what the dead seek, which attracts middle-class and upper-middle-class clients, who disclose their secrets and fears in their desperate attempts to seek penance or material profit from the unknown. In these acts, Harbart appears to control their lives through his 'irrational' logic. Although Harbart is aware that his reasons are based on his learnings from books rather than any intuitive knowledge (the narrator clarifies that he sincerely believes in them and is not cheating his clients), he feels empowered through this act; more so, because he can detect the 'irrational', strange, and secretive aspirations and practices of the 'rational' and orderly middle classes, he can potentially control their lives too.

⁴⁵⁶ The narrator adds after a few lines: 'Harbart had not come to know that the same Bijoy had died in police firing in front of a snacks shop'. Ibid, p. 51.

⁴⁵⁷ Ibid, p. 54.

After his discovery, the rumour about Harbart spreads fast. Indeed, after his success in the first year, articles are written on him in local and national dailies. This fame fetches wealthy clients, promoters like Surapati Maarik who work on the ‘saintly businesses’, and finally the challengers, Prabir Ghosh and the West Bengal Rationalist Association who are on a mission to ‘rid the state of people like Harbart’.⁴⁵⁸ It is phenomenal how Harbart becomes so popular in such a short time. Why does this happen? Why does the ‘rational’ urban population believe in his newfound super-power so easily? Is it because he is considered a ‘freak’? Or, is there a case to be made about the supernatural and the non-rational being integral to the constitution of postcolonial urban life? The novel begins on May 25, 1992, the day that Harbart dies, and then goes back to his birth and develops the narrative in a Bildungsroman format. 1992 was an important year for India. In 1991 India declared the liberalisation of its economy, and from 1992, it opened its doors officially to multinational capitalism with policies of deregulation, huge tax exemption, and other lucrative deals for foreign companies, in order to recover the debt-and-inflation-ravaged economy.⁴⁵⁹ This is also the year that saw the demolition of the 1527-built mosque Babri Masjid and a resumption of the bloody communal violence between Hindus and Muslims.⁴⁶⁰ To put these two issues together, if the year propagated globalisation and deregulation as essential for development and as constitutive of the governance of the postcolonial ‘rational’ subject, the dark and ‘unreasonable’ events of communal violence also made it clear that the society was still at least partly feudal and partly neo-colonial in character.⁴⁶¹ It is impractical to govern a country based solely on enlightenment values

⁴⁵⁸ Maarik tells him that he would help expand the business ‘in style’: ‘a glass-enclosed air-conditioned swank office [...] a woman to operate the computer. Shiny expensive books about all this on the shelves. Soft music. Dim lights. Carpet. Five hundred bucks a visit’, etc. Ibid, p. 95.

⁴⁵⁹ Stuart Corbridge and John Harriss, *Reinventing India: Liberalization, Hindu Nationalism, and Popular Democracy* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000), pp. 143-72.

⁴⁶⁰ Christophe Jaffrelot, *The Hindu Nationalist Movement in India* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), pp. 449-81; for a brief history of this period, see Barbara Metcalf and Thomas Metcalf, *Concise History*, pp. 265-94.

⁴⁶¹ This is also why there was a furore in Calcutta around the same time with the death of Balak Brahmachari, a.k.a. Birendra Chakraborty, who was the leader of a religious sect known as Santana Dal. After Brahmachari died, his followers declared the death as a *Samadhi* (the last stage of meditation without physical consciousness). They said he would rise again, as he had on a previous occasion, and guarded his dead body closely, allowing no one to enter the *ashram*. After many complaints from the neighbours, and after the influential local daily *Ajkaal* had started covering the incident widely, the police were sent to the area to remove the dead body, resulting in multiple skirmishes with the followers. Finally, the rotten body of the ‘saint’ was removed, making many think that this delay was a deliberate case of state lobbying (as the Santan Dal workers were traditionally CPI (M) voters). For a longer reading, see Chatterjee, *Politics of the Governed*, pp. 40-80. Bhattacharya would later write a novel, *Mausoleum* (Kolkata: Dey’s 2007) based on this incident.

that has evolved from thousands of years of different knowledge- and culture-regimes. It is equally unrealistic to shape the people's subjectivity based exclusively on a system of instrumentalist knowledge-gathering and bureaucratic rationality. The current postcolonial modern state can preach that reason is its governing drive, but that does not uproot or invalidate years of local, custom-based ritual and cultural practices, or people's belief in such practices. This is why a publicly-marked 'weird' person like Harbart can suddenly and persuasively declare that he can talk with the dead and be a medium between the other-worldly and the worldly. Thousands of people gather at his place and listen to his dramatic speeches on afterlife and on the various geometrical spheres that the living and the dead belong to.⁴⁶² The attraction of the 'irrational', Bhattacharya suggests here, is precisely that it exposes the myths of material development even as it is produced by the latter. As Harbart is challenged by the Rationalist Association for his 'trickery' and threatened with arrest, he replies: 'Fine. That's fine. We'll take care of you too [...] When they were leaving, Harbart was chanting as he danced around the room – oh my god how I humped them! Cat bat water dog fish! Cat bat water dog fish!'⁴⁶³ The narrator adds that it is never clear what Harbart means by the word 'we', but the readers may wonder if he means the group of people who practise these kind of acts, i.e. the fortune-tellers, sorcerers, astrologers, and the like, who use 'non-rational' means to calculate and speak about the human past and future. 'We' may also refer to the majority of people who believe in these acts of afterlife and fortune-telling, or those who find it unnecessary and unfitting for a postcolonial society to erase these practices and to instead embrace the 'hyper-rational' instrumentalist drives for a regime of reason and normality. Throwing a counter-challenge at the Association in his own vocabulary, in vulgar Bengali slang, Harbart feels empowered. He dances around in joy and utters his nonsensical composition, 'cat bat water dog fish', suggesting a verbal triumph over reason, science, and the borrowed Anglicised manners and practices (manifest in the Association members' westernised dressing and use of English). Although in the next scene Harbart is found dead in his house, there is a cryptic suicide note that says he is on some sort of a pilgrimage.⁴⁶⁴ Hence, we are given the warning that his death should

⁴⁶² However, the narrator tells us that he learns of this world from his 'after-world' readings.

⁴⁶³ Bhattacharya, *Harbart*, p. 114.

⁴⁶⁴ The note reads, 'The guppy of the tank is off to the ocean. | Want to see the double chyang? Dying to see | the double chyang? Cat bat water dog fish'. See Bhattacharya, *Harbart*, p. 131. Though the police or the family and neighbours are not able to recover the meaning or context, the reader has

not be taken as the end of the game; he will come back. The fact that his corpse explodes in the crematorium furthers the sense of puzzle and mystery for the police and the journalists, the bourgeois 'rational' subject. Through these acts, Bhattacharya indicates that the mysterious and puzzling co-existence of the religious, ritualistic, non-rational, immaterial elements and the rational, material, and scientific aspects of society is a fundamental aspect of the nature of Indian urban society. Erasing people like Harbart as part for the drive towards westernising society and culture is to overlook the historico-cultural constitution of the society itself.

Harbart registers this aspect of the 'irrational' and the uneven in the everyday 'rational-normal' in the distribution and arrangement of urban space. As the brief Naxalite part of the novel ends, the narrator comments that 'The fetid, dank, inconsequential period that followed was so wearying as to be unparalleled in history, at any rate. And it was doubtful whether anything changed even over centuries in the fragment of the city where Harbart lived'.⁴⁶⁵ The Naxalbari movement failed to bring any substantial social or political change, and was followed by a time of gentrification where the urban space was re-arranged in alignment with the shifting aspirations for the globalised consumerist culture: 'the multi-storeyed structures put up by real-estate promoters to replace the old buildings had ensured a change of taste'.⁴⁶⁶ What this change meant for the urban poor is that people like Harbart with their 'weird' imaginations and cultural practices would have to live with these current transformations of space and society, and to continue to be neglected, victimised, and rendered invisible. As I will shortly show through the (dissenting) examples of Harbart, the urban poor would have to use nooks and corners and live in slums and

already seen Harbart's physical and psychological growth thanks to the novel's Bildungsroman narrative, and would know that the first line refers to an abuse Harbart received from his cousin, Dhanna-da, about him being a 'guppy of the tank', which means weak, limited in knowledge, and unfamiliar with the world outside. The latter half of the line about going to the ocean resonates an earlier episode in which Harbart shouted at the people of the Rationalist Association, challenged them, abused them, and ran them out of his house. The line therefore means that he is not a small and weak fish anymore; he is about to meet the bigger fishes and come back with them. The 'double chyang' reference comes from the Howrah (West Bengal) railway labourers. Chyang is a fish of shallow and filthy water. The allusion makes the point that it is unwise to oppress the labourers, 'filthy' people, for they possess such weird powers that there would be no hope for the powerful. How Harbart knew of this phrase, the narrator informs, is never known. The references to 'cat bat' and others in the third line were used by Harbart whenever he encountered anything aristocratic, anglicised, and refined in manners. He uttered this phrase repeatedly to register his verbal triumph over the use of English and scientific logic by the Rationalist Association.

⁴⁶⁵ Ibid, p. 55.

⁴⁶⁶ Ibid, p. 55.

shanties that are shaded off from public life, because the bourgeois-consumerist arrangement of space has hardly given them a recognisable place, capital or visibility, and wants them to be quarantined or liquidated for a sanitised vision of the city.⁴⁶⁷ But since these people are also needed by the bourgeoisie as a labour-force, the urban poor would still have to be there, even if rendered invisible. Space thus appears to be a potent trope through which Bhattacharya situates his notion of postcolonial modernity. This notion of space has a historical link with the fantastic. José B. Monleón tells us that the fantastic genre emerged with the rise of modernity in Britain. It was born in the nineteenth century when mercantile and industrial capitalism attempted to suppress and supersede older feudalist forms of knowledge and belief systems, paving way for the return of the 'irrational' in the form of the sublime and the gothic as cultural forms integral to the material development of society: 'unreason was now the product of society' rather than a foreign intrusion into the social.⁴⁶⁸ In colonial times, as a number of critics have argued, modernity had an ambiguous, coeval character, in which the colonialist aspiration to search for the 'rational', and the practice and preservation of age-old customs and the 'irrational', went hand-in-hand, becoming coagulated in time.⁴⁶⁹ In the postcolonial context in general, with the aggressive expanse of advanced forms of global capitalism and consumerism, modernity's coeval character became more intense with the revival of local cultural practices to adapt to its new socio-economic demands. Anthropologists John Comaroff and Jean Comaroff inform us that 'intensified market competition [in contemporary South Africa has] set many people in motion and disrupted their sense of place; dispersed class relations across international borders; and widened the gulf between flows of fiscal circulation and sites of concrete production, thus permitting speculative capital to appear to determine the fate of postrevolutionary societies'.⁴⁷⁰ This has dramatically widened the gaps between the rich and the poor, producing on the one hand a consumerist, comfortably settled, and visibly rich middle class, and on the other, raw inequality,

⁴⁶⁷ For a reading of how the postcolonial metropolis attempts to sanitise the space by covering up its ugly slums and its urban poor in order to cater to globalised capitalism, see Rahul Pandita's chapter, 'Give me Red', in *Hello, Bastar*, pp. 1-14, where he records the strategies of cleaning Delhi before the 2010 Delhi Commonwealth Games.

⁴⁶⁸ José B. Monleón, *A Spectre is Haunting Europe: A Sociohistorical Approach to the Fantastic* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), pp. 81-103, (p. 67).

⁴⁶⁹ See Chatterjee, *Modernity*, p. 20; Kaviraj, 'Indian', p. 157; Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, pp. 37-46.

⁴⁷⁰ Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff, 'Alien-Nation: Zombies, Immigrants, and Millennial Capitalism', *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 101.4 (2002), 779-805 (p. 797).

poverty, and dispossession, encouraging the ‘desires’ of imitation by the have-nots. Such desires have forcefully brought back the ‘occult economies’ of witch-hunting, black magic, or zombie-labour in the urban spaces, the use of which by the lower classes points at the caricaturing of the logic of demand and supply (speculative capital) in acquiring wealth without conventional means and costs of labour. Magic in this process re-codes the value system of surplus labour: wealth created out of nothing.⁴⁷¹ The rise of a ‘spectral army of labour’, i.e. the use of illegal immigrants and unofficial bodies for wage labour (night work) or fraudulent activities, the two Comaroffs add, is associated with a ‘discontent’ and ‘anger’ of the lower class with the current realities of joblessness, poverty, and structural inequality. The occult practices of witchcraft and black magic should not be seen as some exotic and enchanting ‘magical realist’ elements in society (which are sold by the media in the global literary-cultural marketplace); rather, a more serious and critical engagement is necessary to comprehend the discontent and the contradictory logic of capital in postcolonial societies.⁴⁷² Upamanyu Pablo Mukherjee tells us that the various contemporary literary and cultural examples (the fictions of Ivan Vladislavić or the film *District 9*, for instance) of black magic and ‘alien-labour’ in a global city like Johannesburg ‘point to the historical tendencies through which [these practices] operate under conditions of uneven development’.⁴⁷³ He reads the unevenness in spatial production of South Africa, especially the co-existence of the modern glitzy towers and the archaic modes of life in the slums, not only as aspects of adaptability and creative energy, but also as indications of long histories of dispossession and dehumanisation of the national and local forms of life by forces of transnational capitalism, ‘the *enforced* and *involuntary* conditions of migration, circumlocution and “flexible existence”’.⁴⁷⁴ The historical basis of the fantastic as generated from the suppression of the ‘irrational’ through the birth of ‘rational’ regimes of knowledge production, and the literary uses of it for a critique of uneven postcolonial modernity, echo prominently in Bhattacharya’s conjunctural use of space.⁴⁷⁵ His fiction, as we

⁴⁷¹ Ibid, p. 786.

⁴⁷² ‘Alien-Nation’, p. 789; see also Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff, ‘Occult Economies and Violence of Abstraction: Notes from the South African Postcolony’, *American Ethnologist*, 26.2 (1999), 279-303, (p. 284).

⁴⁷³ Upamanyu Pablo Mukherjee, ‘Ivan Vladislavić: Traversing the Uneven City’, *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 48.5 (2012), 472-84, (p. 473).

⁴⁷⁴ Ibid, p. 476; emphasis in original.

⁴⁷⁵ A comparative reference here is Patrick Chamoiseau’s *Texaco* (1992), trans. by Rose-Myriam Réjouis (London: Granta, 1997).

will now see in both of his works, not only brings material and non-material spaces together to suggest the complex *binding* of postcolonial urbanity, but also uses them effectively to employ a fierce social critique of multinational capitalism and Left politics in the contemporary context.

There are at least four different kinds of material spaces or spatial arrangements in *Harbart*. The first is the isolated, but enclosed, intimate space of Harbart's attic roof. I term this the vertical space (for the roof connection), which also has a meaning of self-empowerment. In order to escape from the humiliating public world, Harbart used to come to the attic roof and hide himself in a defunct water-tank, devouring his books on the afterlife. The narrator writes, 'The attic roof used to be Harbart's space. All his realizations had come to him there. On that very attic roof Harbart had had the extraordinary dream that had brought him social recognition and fame, but, indirectly, had also been the cause of his total destruction'.⁴⁷⁶ The dream here refers to the dream of Binu's diary. This episode has not yet happened at this point, so the narrator foreshadows an anxious anticipation here. Note also the statement that all his realisations have come to him there. Since Harbart is an orphan and socially ostracised for his eccentric behavior and speech patterns, he is shown to develop an interest in reading books on the afterlife to know where his parents are. Slowly this interest becomes a habit, and he is drawn to the persuasive arguments and logic in these books, which provide him not only an escape route to and solace from a different comforting world, but also gives him answers to many puzzling, abusive acts by his cousins and neighbours. Consider the narration in the following episode, where Harbart's aunt, who is sympathetic to Harbart, is arguing with her son, Dhanna-da, over Harbart's share of their property:

He's a good boy, that's why he never asks [for his share of property]. What's wrong with asking? Shouldn't he get his father's share?

Now you're making me lose my temper. To hell with his father's share. Are there enough brains in that skull of his to manage his property? Share! Balls!

What'll you do if he does ask?

⁴⁷⁶ Bhattacharya, *Harbart*, p. 33.

I'll beat him up till he runs away, that's what I'll do. What about the cost of food and clothes for all these years? Let him account for that. I'll tear that motherfucker apart.⁴⁷⁷

After these dialogues, the narrator divulges no information regarding how the matter goes, what kind of share Harbart has, if he is beaten by Dhanna-da. There is no arousal of sentimental sympathy for Harbart. What is offered is a mode of narration where Harbart's thoughts and the narrator's appear the same. In this diegetic narration, we are made sure that the afterworld has the best answers and Harbart is correct in seeking them from this world. The narrator asks:

Did the books in Harbart's room offer an explanation?

Sensual materialists are unable to understand the afterworld. Leave alone the afterworld, they are unable to understand many subtle aspects even of earthly life. Their minds and bodies are perpetually obsessed with and addicted to sensual and materialist pleasures; hence the pure truth concerning the afterworld is not instilled in their minds [...].

– *Mysteries of the Afterworld*⁴⁷⁸

The answer to the narrator's question is not given by the narrator 'himself' or by Harbart, but by an excerpt from a book. It suggests that Harbart has full faith in the reasoning and logic of the afterworld. The narrator is also sympathetic to Harbart in his rationalisation of the latter's acts of knowing the afterworld and believing in its truth-claims. The narrator has full faith in Harbart and is never judgmental or condescending in 'his' remarks, although 'he' is at times disapproving of Harbart's acts, like a participant-narrator full of critical solidarity with the characters. Much of the narration in the first part and Harbart's particular development of character (his 'realizations') take place on the attic space. This attic space, we are told, has not only saved him from the abuse of bullies outside, but is also connected with a pleasant world of kites, flying cranes, rising smoke, and exploration of sexuality. Against popular perception, he thinks of himself as an important, forceful, and imaginative person who knows about realities beyond the façade of the real in life, about the possibilities that the future holds for mankind, and about the curative power of talking

⁴⁷⁷ Ibid, p. 40.

⁴⁷⁸ Ibid, pp. 40-41.

to the dead. Together, the attic space's higher footing off the grounds, its protective nature, and its comforting and secure location for gaining knowledge about the afterworld which Harbart will later describe as a 'higher nobler space of the dead', makes the attic roof a space of self-empowerment for him.

Against this vertical space are the three spaces of the horizontal – the laid out, everyday space of the external world – which is a space of pain and sorrow for him. It reminds him of his orphanage, his lack of education, his material failures, his unfulfilled dreams and desires, his public humiliations. About twenty minutes from Harbart's house are the wealthy districts whose street names – Loudon, Rawdon, Robinson, and Outram – make Harbart feel like a 'sahib'. Harbart always traverses this space wearing a long ulster coat, black trousers, and an old tattered hat, and instantly utters his nonsensical English composition, 'cat bat water dog fish'.⁴⁷⁹ He sometimes visits the Park Street cemetery and the antique glass house, where he can see the blonde nymph of his dreams, a stone carving of a beautiful girl who reminds him of his first love Buki, and of the naked Russian woman chased by German soldiers in a film he watched as a child.⁴⁸⁰ This space, which is simultaneously local and international in character, is Harbart's space of desire and imitation – his clothes, his activities in and associations with the space transport him to a world of late Victorian (decadent) culture. This bourgeois space is juxtaposed with the third space of consumerist violence, with 'multi-storeyed structures', new video-renting shops, fast food stores, new cars, and television.⁴⁸¹ Contrasting this uneven world of late-colonial and the consumerist capitalist space is the relatively poor and old neighbourhood where Harbart lives, the fourth space – a world of decrepit houses, old buildings, flashy signboards, tea shops, groceries, whore alleys, portico pillars, lepers on the pavement, and the smell of smoke and piss – the space.⁴⁸² This is the space for the urban poor. It co-exists with the bourgeois-metropolitan spaces, but is mostly unseen from the cultural and capital centres. It is marginal and cornered – the space wherein the work-force for the bourgeoisie lives.

⁴⁷⁹ Ibid, p. 81. I will come back to the utterance 'cat bat water do fish' in the next section.

⁴⁸⁰ Ibid, pp. 90-91.

⁴⁸¹ Ibid, p. 55.

⁴⁸² Ibid, p. 91.

Harbart, who has long been bullied and harassed by his neighbours, friends, and family, and loathes the bourgeois middle classes and the police, separates himself from this horizontal-external space, and decides to seek power and meaning in the afterworld. He finds not only empowerment in this act, but also his respect for Binu who tells him about the revolutionary potential of the afterlife. In an episode about Harbart's grief over his orphanage, the narrator says: 'Of course elections have taken place a few times. It had made no difference to Harbart. He had never voted. Every election day, he had simply remained on the attic roof instead of going anywhere. It had seemed like paying a tribute to Binu. But he didn't have too many memories of Binu'.⁴⁸³ There is a suggestion here that, like Binu who stood against bourgeois consumerism and against the moderate, parliamentary politics of the Communist Party, Harbart is a resisting political subject. Note also the nature of narration. Harbart does not seem to be aware of the political nature of this act. He does it to remember, condole, and pay respect to his first and only intimate friend, Binu. However, there does seem to be an affective politicisation here as well, even if Harbart does not consciously politicise himself unlike Sujata in *Mother of 1084*. As the final statement suggests, he does these acts because he only has very few memories of Binu – or, figuratively, because the Binus of the Naxalite generation have become a distant past in the rise of consumerism and the Left's bourgeois politics. This act is the preservation of Binu's memory – that Binus will somehow ignite the minds of the urban poor. Interestingly, this thought also occurs to him on the vertical attic space. Binu and Naxalism will continue to influence and politicise him without him consciously knowing. The question of self-empowerment in the vertical space is best understood in a particular section of the novel where he meets the first member of his family-lineage, Dhnu, who takes him 'in the sky' and 'shows' him the whole genealogy of male descendants and their dissolute and meaningless life, even after death.⁴⁸⁴ Harbart looks at them, and then looks down and finds himself to be a small dot in a small room on the earth with a meaningless future waiting for him after death. What this scene indicates is that contrary to the three material-horizontal spaces which inflict physical pain and humiliation on him, the material-irrational world of the vertical appears to be a space of self-realisation and agency. The vertical space not

⁴⁸³ Ibid, p. 56.

⁴⁸⁴ Ibid, p. 110.

only gives meaning to Harbart's life and living, it also empowers him. He experiences himself as a human being because he can utilise this space to control the dreams and aspirations of the bourgeoisie, who seek ablution and penance from their cold pursuit of material wealth in the supernatural-vertical through talking to the dead, through receiving messages from him. It is a space that co-exists with the material space, but is also stationed on a higher and 'nobler' plane – a space of higher powers, mercy, and self-cleansing.

As the novel draws to a close, all these different spaces are juxtaposed during Harbart's funeral. Those present include his friends and local admirers who chant his name in celebration, 'Long Live Harbart-da!' (which stands for the carnivalesque celebrations of the bizarre by the subaltern), the police and the journalists (representing the rationalist-bureaucratic world of surveillance and reasoning), Satpati Maarik (the world of capitalist consumerism), and the old obsolescent world of Dhnu and the other great-grandfathers and parents who watch Harbart's sad demise (the ghostly world of dead parents and grandparents, a genealogy that we carry with ourselves every day whether we admit to ourselves or not). By juxtaposing these different horizontal and vertical spaces, Bhattacharya appears to suggest that the everyday of the postcolonial (Indian) metropolitan space is marked by all of them. These different spaces compete with each other for domination in meaning-making, but this domination is relative, since the existence of the subordinated or the displaced is what enables the recognition of domination. This is why when Harbart is frightened by the Rationalist Association's challenge and yet declares his innocence, the suggestion is that not only are the aspects of the non-rational an equally relevant and referential point of entry to answering critical questions in society, but also that our society is characterised by different counter-lifeworlds and beliefs. A belief based on facts and evidence, or one using English as the main language in discussions, or one doubting every native cultural practice as a form of deception (as done by the Rationalist Association), is the dominating form of reality in our postcolonial hyper-rationalised society. It is the same society that harbours dark, puzzling, and unreasonable elements of communal violence: puzzling because one paradigm of thought cannot respond convincingly to questions and crises set by the other. As Gyan Prakash writes, the practice of using science and rationality for producing meaning and knowledge has genealogical connection with the promotion of science and

technology in colonial India, particularly in the aftermath of the 1857 Sepoy Mutiny, and with the construction of the Western-educated, ‘rational’ colonised subject: ‘To be a nation was to be endowed with science which had become the touchstone of rationality [...] the Indian nation-state that came into being in 1947 was deeply connected to science’s work as a metaphor, to its functioning beyond the boundaries of the laboratory as a grammar of modern power’.⁴⁸⁵ But Prakash also shows that reason, rationality, and the promotion of science did not dismantle and replace conservative religious, caste, and gender practices. It remained coagulated and coeval with them, making Indian modernity ‘simultaneously as something altogether new and unmistakably old, at once undoubtedly modern and purely Indian’.⁴⁸⁶ This element is presented in the juxtaposition of spaces I just discussed. At the same time, this is also why the aspect of explosion in the novel’s end appears to be an important play.⁴⁸⁷ By allowing Harbart’s body to explode, Bhattacharya keeps the elements of puzzle and mystery as a trigger of disquiet and unease within ‘rational’ argumentation. He then forces the responsibility of justification onto the bureaucratic. The police conclude that the body explodes because Binu, Harbart’s Naxalite nephew, placed dynamite underneath the bed to hide from the police.⁴⁸⁸ This appears to be the only ‘rational’ conclusion for the explosion. But we never receive confirmation that this ever happened. The open-endedness of the novel indicates that the ‘rational’ world, which an urban educated human subject so overwhelmingly embraces, also has its points of confusion, dogma, and contingency. This is suggested tellingly with Pranab Ghosh’s response – ‘Isn’t Harbart urban too?’ – to a member of the Rationalist Association who compares the ‘country bumpkin’ Harbart to a clever urban trickster.⁴⁸⁹ This is then followed by a long silence. Urbanity and modernity are understood to be in the domain of the ‘rational-pragmatic’. But the domain contains characters such as Harbart as well. The riddle of Harbart’s discovery of ‘superhuman’ powers, his suicide, and the explosion of his corpse appear to be the author’s reminder that the

⁴⁸⁵ Gyan Prakash, *Another Reason: Science and the Imagination of Modern India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), pp. 6-7.

⁴⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

⁴⁸⁷ Bhattacharya once stated, ‘I don’t understand writing as a way of offering entertainment. For me, writing has a deeper alchemy, and there is a risk of explosion there’. See Bhattacharya, ‘Introduction’, in *Srestho Galpo*, p. 9.

⁴⁸⁸ Bhattacharya, *Harbart*, p. 140.

⁴⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 131.

postcolonial urban space is historically conjunctural in nature. A hyper-rational, pro-developmental, and homogenised society will only result in discontent and agitation.

***Kāngāl Mālshāt* and filth**

The conjunctural (irreal) nature of postcolonial urban modernity and aesthetics is more powerfully articulated in Bhattacharya's fyataru-choktar-based novel, *Kāngāl Mālshāt* (*Warcry of the Beggars*).⁴⁹⁰ Fyatarus first appear in a short story, 'Fyataru', in the magazine *Proma* in 1995 where one of the protagonists, Madan, defines the fyatarus as lower-class flying humans whose supernatural flight at night creates panic within the police and the upper-class people. Madan tells D.S., the would-be fyataru:

Not everyone can be a fyataru. One needs proper qualifications. You, for example, go to big offices, and when the officers don't meet you, or make you wait, you just don't sit there peacefully, do you? – you curse him, stick your snot vengefully to the handles of the armchairs, scratch and make a hole in the sofa, tell me, haven't you done that?

'Yes, I have.'

'Damage. Damage whenever you can. You have to keep it in your mind. We recruit only those who keep that in mind.'⁴⁹¹

The fundamental functions of the fyatarus are to bring damage and manufacture fear through flight. The story ends as the fyatarus, the flying beggars, prostitutes, sweepers, and crooks attack a midnight party of the refined aristocratic class in a floating hotel on the river Ganga. Reminiscent of the political tactics of sabotage by industrial workers, as noted by Timothy Mitchell in *Carbon Democracy*,⁴⁹² the fyatarus attack and sabotage the upper-class bourgeois values of hygiene, sophistication, and aesthetic beauty with weapons such as brooms, dog shit, rotten food, alcohol bottles, human excreta, unused flesh, discarded bottles, metals, etc. This sudden attack from above

⁴⁹⁰ *Kāngāl Mālshāt* was published in 2003 and soon became a cult novel for its use of unconventional narrative style and genre, its plot of lower-class militants launching a warfare against the state, and its coarse, vulgar, parodic language. It is currently being translated into English. A film has already been made by Suman Mukhopadhyay (2013) to high critical acclaim. I am using the edition published in his *Upanyas Samagro [The Complete Novels of Nabarun Bhattacharya]* (Kolkata: Dey's, 2010), pp. 229-380.

⁴⁹¹ *Sanglap* 2.1 sup, pp. 136-49 (p. 142). Slightly modified.

⁴⁹² See the chapter 'Sabotage' in Mitchell, *Carbon Democracy: Political Power in the Age of Oil* (London: Verso, 2011), pp. 144-72.

(again, note the aspect of verticality as empowerment) using the filthiest of elements and craziest of laughter unnerves the police as they fail to identify the ‘criminals’.⁴⁹³

Nabarun reintroduces the *fyatarus* in *Kāngāl Mālshāt*. This time, *fyatarus* are accompanied by another lumpen force called the *choktars*, whose characters include Bhodi, Nalen, Sorkhel, and Bechamoni. They are sorcerers who practise black magic and live in the shanty towns and slums. They offer shelter to those who may be interested in the activities of witchcraft, sorcery, the ‘game of pillow-exchange’ (political negotiations), etc.⁴⁹⁴ They have a leader, a huge ancient raven who has been living ‘from time immemorial’, who holds ‘world history in his right fist’, and who, together with the ghosts of a fat English woman from eighteenth-century colonial Bengal named Begum Johnson, and of a major general from the army, is plotting warfare against the state. They want to teach the state a lesson using unreal guerrilla warfare because the state has neither listened to their demands nor allowed them their civil and political rights (the nature of these rights is not clear in the narrative). Their intention is not to kill the opponent, but to shoot discarded, filthy, and abominable objects at it and to defile public space. In their militant spirit, unlawful activities, armed struggles against the state, and vulgar and coarse language, they are, as Bhattacharya’s middle-class narrators and characters derogatorily call them, the ‘lumpens’. Having been neglected and exploited over the years by the consumerist state, they have decided to mobilise their powers of the fantastic and the supernatural to practise their mysterious form of guerrilla warfare. My discussion here remains limited to the use of filth and filth-making in the novel, which I argue shares some connection with Naxalite politics and also reflects on the contemporary socio-economic and political contexts.

There is an astonishing preoccupation with filth and dirt in the novel.⁴⁹⁵ Filth is not just used as an object of attack by the lumpen class, but also as a mode of

⁴⁹³ Bhattacharya, ‘Fyataru’, pp. 151-59.

⁴⁹⁴ Bhattacharya, *Kangal*, p. 245.

⁴⁹⁵ There have been Bakhtinian readings on this novel, especially through the lens of the carnivalesque. But I think Bakhtin’s category does not allow as broad and historical an engagement with the aspect of filth and class as I plan to stage here. For a reading of the carnivalesque in Bhattacharya, see Tapodhir Bhattacharya, ‘Carnivaler Bisforon’ [‘The Explosion of Carnival’], *Aksharekha*, 1.1 (2008), 140-48; Aritra Chakraborti, ‘Reading and Resistance in the Works of Nabarun Bhattacharya’, *Sanglap: Journal of Literary and Cultural Inquiry*, 2.1 Sup (2015), 16-32; Dibyakusum Ray, ‘Biplab, Pratirodh, Bichitra – Nabarun Bhattacharyaer Antorpath’ [‘Revolution, Resistance, Bizarre – An Intellectual Reading of

critique. Consider for instance the passage in the beginning of the novel, when Barilal, a lower-middle-class figure who will go on to be the sole witness to the *fyataru-choktar* entente against the state, visits Keonratala (a burning ghat or crematorium on the edge of river Ganga) to ‘study human form’ and discovers the desecrated busts of noted cultural icons:

Sir Ashutosh Mukhopadhyay. Alas, the Royal Bengal Tiger! Alas, Calcutta University! Alas, Calcutta Municipal Corporation! What a pathetic state his memorial is in! Filthy, colourless, cracked in parts, littered with bird shit [...] opposite his is the bust of Rajendranath Mukhopadhyay. His case appears even sadder. The smokers of weed, the vandals have stolen the expensive chains around his neck and made large cracks on his face. If it has any basis, the respected Sri Subalchandra Mitra is told to have stated these words about him: ‘No Bengali has the name and prestige equal to his amongst the white business classes.’ Let alone the whites or the lord and ladies, not even the black *lumpen* natives seem to give him a damn [...] Barilal had to cancel his plans of turning further left because the place was littered with puke, moss, and shit [...] he stood before Saratchandra [Chattopadhyay]’s memorial bust. This is the current status of our Bengali race and literature. Had there not been a protective grille around Saratchandra’s dirty bust, someone would have beheaded him and fled off with the bust. As it has happened with some. There seems to be no end to this negligence, this insult, and this humiliation.⁴⁹⁶

Like Barilal, the educators, cultural reformers, and writers mentioned throughout this passage – including Rabindranath Tagore and Rammohan Roy – belonged to the middle or upper middle class.⁴⁹⁷ They worked to better the socio-economic and cultural conditions of their class, but their works gradually turned into acts of solidifying class and caste boundaries and a popularisation of Hindu nationalism. In the postcolonial period, these reformers were declared cultural icons by the state. Although many of these busts belong to anti-colonial militant nationalists, these are meant only to be admired and worshipped and not to be followed. In the current consumerist state, they have, ironically, along with their fellow cultural reformers, come to stand for cultural prestige and the establishment, as iconic pointers to a rich

Nabarun Bhattacharya’s Works’], in ‘Molotov Cocktail’, *Aihik* (2016) <http://www.aihik.in/aihik/Article/524_.html> [accessed 23 Jan, 2017].

⁴⁹⁶ Bhattacharya, *Kangal*, pp. 237-39.

⁴⁹⁷ Though Barilal is from the lower middle class, his critical views reconfirm how similar class-driven perceptions shape identity and value across the hierarchy of the middle classes.

historical past – empty symbols of pride and power for a middle class that is itself ideologically bankrupt. This aspect of desecrating the busts of cultural reformers has a direct link with urban Naxalite politics. As we mentioned in the introductory sections of this chapter, being utterly frustrated with the existing socio-economic system, the meaninglessness of education, the perennial condition of joblessness, bureaucratic laziness, nepotism and corruption, the student/Naxalites in mid-60s Calcutta began to express their discontent by breaking chairs and tables in the classroom, tearing university examination answer scripts or their degree certificates after convocations, and, indeed, smashing, defiling, blackening the statues and busts of icons like Rammohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Sir Ashutosh Mukherjee, Mahatma Gandhi, and Rabindranath Tagore.⁴⁹⁸ The Naxalites called for a ‘cultural revolution’ that would take into account the contributions of the lower classes and castes to the making of our history and culture, the people who question and challenge bourgeois dominance in governance and the cultures of corruption and complacency, and the texts that tell us why the people on the margins, the peasants and the urban poor, have to continue to suffer socio-economically in the postcolonial period – in short, a restructuring of cultural values based on the demands and politics of the vulnerable classes.⁴⁹⁹ In the current example of bust desecration in the burning ghat, there is a strong suggestion of a similar class-based hatred and anger. This suggestion is corroborated by the fact that Barilal also finds in his survey a number of busts, mostly belonging to sadhus (outcaste saints and fakirs), that are kept intact. The suggestion is that since most of the daily population of this ghat is from the lower classes and lower castes working in the area and the sadhus who come to smoke weed, they find a critical solidarity with these busts and figures – these busts are their cultural leaders and motivators. Filth then appears to carry a specific class-based critique in the novel. Let me tease out the meaning and function of filth more specifically through literary-anthropological and historical readings.

In her classic study of dirt and pollution, Mary Douglas writes that nothing is inherently dirty: dirt is a ‘matter out of place’.⁵⁰⁰ A thing assumes the connotation of dirt by being in the wrong place in a society’s understanding of social order. What is

⁴⁹⁸ Banerjee, p. 181; Dasgupta pp. 71-75.

⁴⁹⁹ Banerjee, pp. 176-86.

⁵⁰⁰ Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concept of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge, 1966), p. 53.

dirty and filthy is in fact cultural and structural in orientation. Building upon these observations, Dominique Laporte argues that as humans evolve and social arrangements develop, human excrement and its attendant sensors, sight and smell, come to be understood as filthy, shameful, and private.⁵⁰¹ This development, during the long industrial drive in Victorian England, established the parameters of culture and prestige, and intensified the class-based meanings of pollution and filth through the fictional and non-fictional renderings and stereotyping of the ‘filthy’ working classes.⁵⁰² Nataalka Freeland tells us that the utopian science fiction in the Victorian period by H. G. Wells and others repeatedly focused on the overt presence of the urban poor and filth in Victorian London and Paris, appearing at times as instructive manuals for waste management.⁵⁰³ Thus, the production and management of filth also appear to be one of the unmentionable aspects about modernity itself. However, filth was not only registered to render and intensify class stereotypes. As Peter Stallybrass and Allon White note, nineteenth-century fictional comparisons of the lumpenproletariat and the urban poor with pigs and swine in terms of cleanliness suggest a trans-coding of values: something that is filthy or peripheral is also often symbolically social.⁵⁰⁴ Elements that the society discards as filthy and dirty are those that also inversely constitute the society and its culture. The word ‘filthy’ in such readings gains a political meaning. Many writers use the transgressive, creative fecundity of the category of the filthy to register their protests against the overwhelming drive for order and rigidity in society and in representation. To follow William Cohen’s words, ‘When people who understand themselves to be degraded or abjected by a dominant order adopt, appropriate and sometimes even celebrate what is otherwise castigated as filth, there is a possibility of revaluing filth while partially preserving its abrasiveness’. He adds, ‘Not merely owning up to, but taking comfort in, one’s filth, one’s own supposed

⁵⁰¹ Dominic Laporte, *History of Shit*, trans. by Nadia Benabid and Rodolphe El-Khoury (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000), p. viii.

⁵⁰² William Cohen writes: ‘the spread of contagious diseases, most notoriously cholera – associated with overcrowding and poor sanitation made the filth of urban slums still more terrifying, both for their inhabitants and for the middle class observers’. See Cohen, ‘Introduction: Locating Filth’, in *Filth: Dirt, Disgust, and Modern Life*, ed. by William Cohen and Ryan Johnson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), pp. vii-xxxvii, (p. xix).

⁵⁰³ Nataalka Freeland, ‘The Dustbin of History: Waste Management in Late-Victorian Utopias’ in *Filth*, ed. by William Cohen and Ryan Johnson, pp. 225-49, (p. 225).

⁵⁰⁴ Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986), p. 45.

dirtiness can serve powerful purposes of self-formation and group identification. In these sense, filth is put to important use, both psychologically and politically'.⁵⁰⁵

This reading of filth as social and structural critique appears particularly relevant for this novel. When Bhattacharya began to write *Harbart* and the fyataru stories, the Left Front government in West Bengal had started its campaign of removing street-side hawkers from public spaces. Ritajyoti Bandyopadhyay tells us that between November 1996 and December 1997, the Calcutta Municipal Corporation carried out the 'Operation Sunshine' campaign which 'evicted thousands of street side stalls to make the enlisted intersections congestion free'.⁵⁰⁶ This step was taken to 'aggressively remake the city as a "world class" urban environment'.⁵⁰⁷ The hawkers, however, did not succumb to the campaign. Several hawkers' organisations, along with various NGOs, contested the campaign, and in 2005 received a court verdict that allowed them to work in designated spaces of the city. The contestation and the compromise between the state and the hawkers on filth-making and cleaning spaces appear to have a strong resonance in *Kāngāl Mālshāt*. Choktars and fyatarus initiate war because the Communist ministers and the industrialists of the city have decided to clean and decorate the city to court multinational investment. The police have been ordered to demolish slums and remove street hawking. The narrative begins as a few policemen see a bunch of skeletal heads dancing on the water in a crematorium. The narrator suggests farcically that this is a warning not 'to kick the butts' of the lower classes, because the latter can take recourse to a range of activities and practices that the instrumentally rational bureaucracy 'can hardly understand'.⁵⁰⁸ On many occasions, the leader of the fyataru-choktar entente, known as the raven, talks about the evil nexus between the Communist leaders, industrialists and police in the postcolonial state. In a long section, the raven raises issues such as the problems of capitalism (that the world is run by the World Bank); the political importance of the early Communist activities in Bengal and, in a wider context, in 1930s and 40s Soviet Russia; corruption in postcolonial societies; the importance of guerrilla and armed warfare; and the way the Communists in Bengal have become a caricature of what

⁵⁰⁵ Cohen, 'Locating', pp. x-xi.

⁵⁰⁶ Ritajyoti Bandyopadhyay, 'Politics of Archiving: Hawkers and Pavement Dwellers in Calcutta', *Dialectical Anthropology*, 35.3 (2011), 295-311 (p. 302).

⁵⁰⁷ Ibid, p. 307.

⁵⁰⁸ We can recall here what the Comaroffs said about 'zombie-labour'.

Marx and Engels or Charu Mazumdar had in mind.⁵⁰⁹ The choktars threaten the local police that if they do not ask the higher powers to stop, then ‘we will piss on your face, release a sea of shit and piss on your clean streets and decorated palaces, and shove our shit up into your arses’.⁵¹⁰ On another occasion, the head of the choktar group, Bhodi, in a meeting with politicians and industrialists in the Bengal Chamber of Commerce, states that if the Communists do not buy AK-47s from them, they would make them ‘eat shit’.⁵¹¹ In the imagery of ‘eating shit’, there is a strong casteist counter-reference. Although it is not clear what their jobs are, throughout the narrative Bhodi, Sorkhel, Nolen and the choktars appear mostly as sweepers, sewage cleaners, or helpers at the crematorium, confronting, handling, and living with shit, piss, filthy water, corpses, rotten objects, and excreta. The caste hierarchy in India, generated and maintained by the Brahmins, the upper castes, and the privileged classes, has consigned the caste-bound roles of menial and scavenging jobs to a fraction of people who are then identified as the Untouchables, the lowest in the caste ladder.⁵¹² They are loathed so much by the middle classes that the phrase ‘eat shit’ has come to stand for a slang which derives its power of insult from its lower caste association.⁵¹³ When the lower-caste choktars use the term, however, there is a strong suggestion that if they are regarded as the shit-eating castes and classes, and thus reduced to being untouchable and filthy, they will use that filthiness to confront the upper castes and classes: making the latter eat shit, bringing them down to the literal bottom of filth and lowliness, and exposing and insulting their preservation of cleanliness and hygiene.⁵¹⁴

⁵⁰⁹ Bhattacharya, *Kangal*, pp. 334-59.

⁵¹⁰ Ibid, p. 358.

⁵¹¹ Ibid, p. 347.

⁵¹² For an analysis, see B. R. Ambedkar, *The Essential Writings of B. R. Ambedkar*, ed. by Valerian Rodrigues (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 351-406; Eleanor Zelliot, *From Untouchable to Dalit: Essays on the Ambedkar Movement* (New Delhi: Manohar, 2001). For a notable fictional representation, see Mulk Raj Anand, *Untouchable* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1940). For literary criticism on the Untouchable fictions, see Toral Jatin Gajrawala, *Untouchable Fictions: Literary Realism and the Crisis of Caste* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013).

⁵¹³ Bhattacharya’s use of the sensational-pulp fiction format in the novel, which I will discuss shortly hereafter, makes me wonder if the ‘eat shit’ reference is related to the popular American insult.

This attack also evokes the powerful caste-based literary critiques that Dalit writers have been expressing in their work. For instance, Baburao Bagul’s *Aghori* (1980) is about a lower-caste ‘goddess’ (the Goddess of filth) who has suddenly encroached the ‘clean’ precincts of an upper-caste house. The narrative dramatises the anxiety and fear towards the invisible and filthy nature of the Goddess (suggesting the simultaneity of the invisibilisation and necessity of the Dalit castes for the upper castes).

⁵¹⁴ One can also think of Om Prakash Valmiki’s autobiography *Joothan*, where he speaks about the violent history and painful meaning of cleanliness and filth for the Dalits. See Om Prakash Valmiki, *Joothan: An Untouchable’s Life*, trans. by Arun Prabha Mukherjee (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008). See also the poems of Marathi Dalit poet Namdeo Dhasal, especially the collection *Golpitha* (1973). Dilip Chitre has translated his poems; see *Namdeo Dhasal: Poet of the Underground*:

As the political heads and businessmen discount their warnings, they first release their specially-manufactured UFOs, which decapitate but do not kill, and then they fly up and perch on rooftops and attack the police on the ground with the filthiest of objects, including human and dog shit, horse piss, rotten flesh, broken brooms and baskets, and mossy earthen pots. That these objects are shot from a ‘penis-cannon’ built in the Portuguese era corroborates a dimension of resistance through the suggestion of class inversion – the subaltern classes are using colonial devices to attack the colonially-minded state through the postcolonial weapon of filth. Bhattacharya seems to suggest here that the abundance of filth in a postcolonial metropolis reflects the failure in sewage and urban planning, and in the suitable rehabilitation of the city’s urban poor. A colonial industrial city like Calcutta is bound to have a large population of poor people, which is a reminder of the city’s historical past, its labour practices, and its particular kind of evolution in culture, class, and status.⁵¹⁵ A coercive repression of filth and ‘filthy’ humans will only end in the return of the repressed.⁵¹⁶ Through the

Poems 1972-2006 (New Delhi: Navayana, 2007). Basudev Sunani, an Odiya Dalit poet, expresses the question of cleanliness and filth powerfully in a poem titled ‘Body Purification’: ‘If you can, but once, | fix a bone in your tongue, | stand firm on the ground | and ask yourself: | Which Ganges can clean | my shit-smeared body? | How many stacks | of tulsi leaves | will sanctify me? | How many tons of sandal paste | will deodorize my body? | How do I look | when I clean your sewer tank | taking out bucket load | of faeces floating | on the water used | for cleaning your bottoms? | How do I look | when I swim breathless | on the water flowing | straight out of your latrines | to clean the sewer depths? | What do I look like when I pick up | the maggot infested mangy dog | to clean the street | so that your car | can have a smooth drive? | Once | just one time | guide the pupils of your eyes | towards the sun | and look at me, | and then only can you measure | what strength you carry | in your sinews. | Wherever I am | the place reeks of bad odour. | Your nose snivels; | your mouth retches | your eyes squirm. | But when I’m sick for a day, | your streets stay unswept; | the latrines choke; | hospitals groan | as patients go on rampage. | Ask your grey cells | but once to explain | what Smriti, Purana, | Intelligence, Education mean. | I’m the one who handles shit | and eats his rice | with the same fingers | and I’m the one | who knows the difference | between shit and rich | yet, I don’t know | What Smriti, Purana, | Intelligence and Education are. | I’ve seen it all – | Worms excreted from your innards, | snot and drivel | Thrown up from your mouth, | Blood congealing | On your death bed. | You may scoff and sneer at me | but when I’m not around, | I know you have | a mental breakdown. | Fix a bone in your tongue | and tell me for once – | how much Ganges, tulsi | and sandal are needed | to purify and sanctify | my shit-smeared body’. See Basudev Sunani, ‘Body Purification’, trans. by JP Das, in the special issues ‘Dalit/Indigenous Australian’, ed. by Mridula Nath Chakraborty and Kent MacCarter, *Cordite Poetry Review*, 55.1 (2016) <<http://cordite.org.au/poetry/dalit-indigenous/body-purification/>> [accessed 25 Jan, 2017].

⁵¹⁵ For a historical reading and further analysis on the aspect of militant nationalism from the urban poor, see Nandini Gooptu, *The Politics of the Urban Poor in Early Twentieth-Century India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University press, 2001); especially pp. 27-64, pp. 143-364. In another novel titled *Lubdhak*, based on the removal of dogs from the streets of Calcutta, Nabarun’s narrator says: ‘the megacity that is beautifying itself in the new millennium in the manner of a gigantic female monster has no room for the dogs’. *Lubdhak* ends with a voluntary decision of mass-exodus by the dogs and a hint that a disaster is imminent for the city. See Bhattacharya, ‘Lubdhak’, in *Upanays Samagra* (Kolkata: Dey’s, 2010), pp. 381-423.

⁵¹⁶ As Sudipta Kaviraj writes in an essay, many of the refugees in the Partition of Bengal in 1947 took shelter in municipal parks and state-maintained public places and started using those spaces for personal and livelihood purposes, even though they were looked down upon by the middle and upper classes for

use of filth, then, Bhattacharya virulently critiques the shameful disposal of the integral elements of postcolonial society in order to accommodate multinational capitalism. He also condemns the practice of invisibilising and removing slums from the streets for their disorderly and filthy appearance, and exposes the political and ideological bankruptcy of the Communist leaders – a bankruptcy which contributed largely to the birth of urban Naxalite politics. The smashing and desecrating of idols, done mostly by the lower classes and the ‘tantric sadhus’ (saints) who come to the crematorium for marijuana suggest a hatred towards the cultural prestige of the Bengali middle classes. The class, together with its mouthpiece, the CPI (M), has never sympathised with the conditions of the lower classes and castes. To remember Bashai’s words, Bengali politics is a politics of *babu* classes and castes catering to *babu* interests. Since the lower class cannot desecrate the icons of cultural conservatism in the *babu*-owned public spaces, the crematorium or the slums are used for displaying anger and hatred and for hatching plots of insurgency. Thus, the use of filth appears strategic and ‘transgressive’ in the novel. As the war continues, filth piles up on the streets, in the police stations, in the offices and houses of the Communist leaders. People are choked with the odour, pushing the government and its repressive forces to finally stop fighting and declare truce.

If filth is used as a mode of social critique, Bhattacharya brings the critique also into the text’s form and structure through the use of the *filthy* genre of sensation fiction. *Kāngāl Mālshāt* is written in a sensational-serial mode. The chapters are chronologically narrated, and the narrator resumes every chapter where it ended last. Each chapter ends with a puzzle or a quote from an ancient or a remotely-known

their disorderly and irreverent nature. They made filth in those spaces with an explicit suggestion that they owned the space and that the middle classes were not welcome there: ‘Filth and disorder, one might suspect, acted as a real barrier erected by the people inside, the new inhabitants of the Calcutta parks, to symbolically establish their control over that space. Since their tolerance of garbage was much greater than the upper-middle-class groups, the filth itself marked their making the place their own, a declaration to the middle classes of their unwelcomeness’. See Kaviraj, ‘Filth and the Public Sphere: Concepts and Practices about Space in Calcutta’, *Public Culture* 10.1 (1997), 83-117, (p. 107). In Bhattacharya’s fiction, the *fyatarus* and *choktars* appear to use the filthy spaces they inhabit with an ironic self-satisfaction because they can carry out their dubious activities without state surveillance. Later they expand their occupation of urban space through the battle with the state, where they shoot discarded and excremental objects on the streets. Their occupation of the urban space through filth-making is a declaration to the state that if their demands are not met, they will damage and destroy the artificial and coercive manufacturing of beauty and cleanliness of the postcolonial Third World urban society. This act of filth-making is also a reminder to the middle class that their objects of disgust and loathing may return to them – be it filth or the filthy subaltern classes: If the middle class and the state push the urban poor to filthy corners, the latter will use that filth to attack and expose the politics of repression and hatred.

writer-scholar from Bengal or from the wider literary traditions of India, which the narrator then picks up in the next chapter and uses to mock the current readers' negligence of Indian literature.⁵¹⁷ For instance, the second chapter ends with a description of Bhodi's dilapidated house in a slum and a signboard which says, 'the house is given to rent for inauspicious activities'. This is then followed by the quote 'yonder is the thing yawning which has no name', taken from Girindrasekhar Bose's *Lal Kalo*.⁵¹⁸ Bhattacharya seems to use this technique to keep the readership drawn to the text. As Andrew King tells us, with the rapid rise of readership in the servant and lower classes, Victorian England saw a tremendous rise in popular serial fiction, most notably Edward Lloyd's *Penny Dreadful* series. These series not only mixed a number of popular sensational genres, such as sentimental fiction, romantic comedy, tragic romance, and melodrama, but also employ several textual strategies such as episodic climaxes, quizzing, astrological details, or strange pictures at the end of a chapter to keep the readership drawn to the narrative.⁵¹⁹ But Bhattacharya's deployment of this technique here in a non-serialised novel is to exploit the satirical nature of the serial-sensational fiction. Consider the narration at the beginning of the third chapter:

No child reads 'Lal Kalo' these days. So no one seems to have any interest in asking what could open its mouth in the dark so wide that it made a bizarre-looking, gigantic executioner sweat in horror. Girindrasekhar [Bose] has been exiled from dream-world to slumber-world. As are exiled those known and not so known literary figures of Dakkhinaranjan [Mitra Majumdar], Dhan Gopal [Mukerji], Hemendrakumar [Roy], Sunirmal [Basu], Khagendranath [Mitra], and Shukhalata [Rao] who used to write for children. Today is the time of litterateur-children rather than children's writer. Children read only Feluda or Tintin these days. Their parents are also dumb. They force so much of high protein, Brenolia, broiler chicken, and Kellogg's cornflakes into their children's brains that these children become weak and effeminate. After these, they tend to learn either computer or dissolution. The offspring of the Big Bong are totally ignorant of the funny teen-characters of Handa-Bhonda, Nonte-Fonte, Batul, the Great, and even Chenga-Benga too. Nowhere in the world is a child so selfish and streetsmart as the Bengali children. Look, for example, the children from our neighbouring country, Bihar. Or of Nepal. One can spot many honest and simple children there. Always. Anyway, back to Barilal.⁵²⁰

⁵¹⁷ This technique is also present in *Harbart*, though without the biting attack on the reading public.

⁵¹⁸ Bhattacharya, *Kangal*, p. 241.

⁵¹⁹ Andrew King, 'Literature of the Kitchen: Cheap Serial Fiction of the 1840s and 1850s', in *A Companion to Sensation Fiction*, ed. by Pamela Gilbert (Malden, MA: Wiley Blackwell, 2011), pp. 38-53.

⁵²⁰ Bhattacharya, *Kangal*, p. 241.

The narrator is deeply critical of the Bengali middle class and its ignorance in India's literary traditions, namely, sensational fiction and children's literature. But this criticality, unlike Devi's narrators, is not expressed in a formal style or in a serious and sober use of language. Rather, the tone is cavalier, frank, and often dismissive. There is a sense of parody in the phrase 'litterateur-children', as the texts of Feluda and Tintin refer to a world of logic, detection, rationality, and globalised consumerism, as opposed to fantasy, wonder, and excitement in the supernatural in the works of the children's writers. The statement of Bengali children being 'weak and effeminate' also carries a clear abuse of gender. What is notable is that Bhattacharya does not cover up for his narrator's language or politics, but rather presents it as it is, which I will argue reflects the author's class-based resistant ideology. The narrator here appears to be from the educated lower class, who knows how the knowledge and culture of the middle class is baseless, how the middle class decorously follows Victorian morality and political correctness, and how the middle class has a habit of attaching derogatory meanings to everything popular. Such a narrator reminds us of the *Battala* sensationalist fictions in nineteenth-century Calcutta. Battala fictions published works such as cheap religious books, handbooks, manuals, pornographic fiction, slapstick comedy, unauthorised translation of English canonical works, sensationalist fiction, and whatever would sell to a lower-class readership. It was a highly popular genre and was loathed by the middle class for its lack of literary quality, its frank treatment of sex, and the eccentric use of moral values.⁵²¹ As recent scholars have shown, this genre, because of its critical and parodic nature, was highly intertextual and subversive in style and form, where the entrenchment of class and caste values and the lessons learnt from the bureaucratic colonial education were widely derided and lampooned.⁵²² Bhattacharya appears to revisit the genre of the Battala sensationalist fictions in order to give voice to his subaltern and lower-class protagonists. Unlike the dignified protagonists in Maxim Gorky's socialist realism or in Premchand's social realism, Bhattacharya's protagonists are subalterns and outcasts. They are from the lowest rungs of the social order, historically known as the dangerous class or the

⁵²¹ See Anindita Ghosh, 'The Battala Book Market', in *Power in Print: Popular Publishing and the Politics of Language of Culture in A Colonial Society, 1778-1905* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006) pp. 107-51.

⁵²² See Ghosh; also, Tanika Sarkar, *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation: Community, Religion and Cultural Nationalism* (London: Hurst, 2001), pp. 65-67; more specifically, see Goutam Bhadra, *Nyara Battolay Jay Kawbar [How Many Times the Baldie Visits Battala]* (Kolkata: Chhatim, 2011).

lumpenproletariat. The ‘lumpens’ either take the form of Harbart to declare their power and presence through the means of the weird (the site of a class alliance between the lumpenproletariat and the marginal babu classes), or they become fyatarus and choktars to mimic the higher classes, to use vulgar language, to expose the hypocrisies of these classes, and to employ a militant guerrilla warfare which they have learnt from their native cultural practices and their association with the Naxalite ranks. In order to represent this politics and practice, Bhattacharya uses a realist mode that avoids the route of social realist proletarian struggle, and mingles marginality, violence, class struggle, parody, horror, supernaturalism, militancy, and social criticism together to establish a realism of a sensationalist genre.⁵²³ The question is not whether such a warfare is possible in reality. Many of the guerrilla warfares challenge what is pragmatically possible. The point is to understand the hatred that the subaltern classes hold for the higher classes, a hatred that does not only include anger and rage but laughter and parody as well, because imitating the bourgeoisie and laughing at its life and culture is also part of the expression of discontent. Like the narrator of the Battala fictions who often enters the narrative and uses a coarse and vulgar language to air his opinions against the middle class and to make a contact with the readership for a rendering of ‘realism’ in fiction, Bhattacharya’s narrator also interrupts with his own social commentary on the consumerism-minded implied readership. These narratorial interruptions are an indication that literature is not an uncritical, undisrupted mediation of social reality. It is a critical tool for creating social consciousness about the way a narrative is written, about how social criticisms are made through narratives, and how narratives are intimately associated with social norms. If Battala fictions use the so-called lowly ways of looking at the world, such lowly ways are a *condition* of being manufactured by the middle and upper classes through their subjection of the lower classes and their labour. Through this form, Bhattacharya appears to restore the *filthy* fictional mode of social criticism and suggests that the realistic representation of reality is a construct, produced by a particular employment of particular fictional tools. The meaning or value attached to the realistic representation of reality is thoroughly class-based.

⁵²³ For a discussion on realism’s debt to sensation fiction, see Daniel Brown, ‘Realism and Sensation Fiction’, in *Sensation Fiction*, ed. by Gilbert, pp. 94-106. Brown writes: ‘Sensation fiction is one genre in which the Gothic is thought to mix with realism in ways that also threatened to undermine realist rationalism’ (p. 101).

Anindya Sekhar Purakayastha writes, ‘When the elitist cult of the writer is being valorised and appropriated by the ideology of the market, Nabarun’s prose has foregrounded the dissident avatar of the writer whose sole objective is to unmask the process of shameless reification of the world’.⁵²⁴ Nabarun Bhattacharya’s later writings have taken up a critical irrealist form to expose and criticise virulently how postcolonial urban life is reified, and how advanced forms of capitalism have shattered the prospects of ideological struggles by the urban/elite as well as by the proletarian sections. As a Marxist, however, he has continued to believe that if the (urban) revolution comes, it will come from the lowest section of society which suffers the most in the current consumerist dispensation – the lumpenproletariat, the Dalits, the outcastes, the women, and the underprivileged, people like Harbart and fyatarus and choktars. It may not take the orthodox Communist form of struggle, but may bend towards guerrilla warfare or anarchic insurgency, and add elements that are conventionally understood as ‘irrational’, local, impractical, and baseless. But there will certainly be a unified struggle from below, from those who are under the yoke. This political faith has never mitigated from Bhattacharya’s literary imagination. In a story ‘Steamroller’, published in the early 1970s, a poor, old, and angry steamroller-driver appears to smash the beautiful cars and sophisticated glass buildings of the bourgeoisie into pieces, compelling the police to frighteningly declare that ‘the revolution has begun’.⁵²⁵ Another story, ‘Prithibir Sesh Communist’ (‘World’s Last Communist’), published in 2007, ends with these evocative and confident lines: ‘The Communists will come back from every part of the world. Yes. They will. But for that, each and every minute and hour of the next seventeen years has to be utilized well. The Communists will return all over the world. They have to. And the world will shake, not for ten days this time, but for ten thousand years.’⁵²⁶ There is as much anger and rage here against bourgeois-consumerist life and capitalist oppression in the postcolonial world as there is sympathy for the oppressed and hope for a socialist future. Writing in the post-Naxalism period and trying to capture the entrenchment of class and caste, Bhattacharya’s urban fantastic mode registers both the historical

⁵²⁴ Anindya Sekhar Purakayastha, ‘Fyatarus and Subaltern War Cries: Nabarun Bhattacharya and the *Rebirth of the Subject*’, *Sanglap: Journal of Literary and Cultural Inquiry*, 1.2 (2015), 90-102. (pp. 91-92).

⁵²⁵ ‘Streamroller’ in Bhattacharya, *Srestho Galpo*, pp. 25-28.

⁵²⁶ ‘World’s Last Communist’, *Sanglap: Journal of Literary and Cultural Inquiry*, 2.1 (2015) 150-55 (p. 154).

specificity of the period, the global factors such as liberalisation and multinational capitalism responsible for the specific shaping of the period as such, and the possibilities and hope of a Naxal guerrilla resistance from the urban poor.

This is the same hope with which Mahasweta Devi ends *Operation? Bashai Tudu* – to return to her one last time – a hope for an emancipated future, which the Naxalbari movement sought through a unified struggle by the peasants, workers, and students, and through the annihilation of the oppressive elements from society. The state could destroy the movement's base, but it could not put out the flames of peasant struggle and insurgency. As Bashai states, as long as the peasant and the peripheral subjects are socio-economically oppressed, they will continue to take up arms and fight. Devi situates this endless nature of fight through the absent presence of Brati and Bashai, and through the affective/argumentative politicisation of Sujata and Kali. She corroborates this nature in the use of the quest mode constituted primarily of the elements of non-linear time, the interventionist and critical nature of narration, and the dialectic between the rational and the fantastic. This mode allows Devi to give these peripheral/critical subjects the ability and the strength to fracture the dominant perspectives, and to gain political subjectivity and voice. I have argued that these modes, whose productions are conditioned by their specific historical conjunctures and international historical and political determinants, and which challenge and expand the contours of realism through their dialectical and critical use of the rational and the non-rational, constitute the framework of critical irrationalism in the postcolonial Indian context.

In the last two chapters, we have seen how the catastrophic conjunctures of famine and starvation compel socially committed and non-conforming authors to employ analytical-affective and metafictional modes in their writing, while political uprisings and post-movement conditions call for the modes of quest and urban fantasy. As we now turn to the final chapter on the declaration of internal emergency in India, we will read a range of realist modes that the authors have taken up to understand the anxious negotiations of democracy and authoritarianism in the postcolonial aftermath.

CHAPTER FOUR

Writing the Indian Emergency: Realisms Without, Above, and Below

In the early hours of 26 June, 1975, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi stunned the nation by proclaiming a state of emergency in India. The surprise soon turned into fear and anxiety as hundreds of Opposition leaders and members were arrested on the same day under the Maintenance of Internal Security Act (MISA). During the following months, around 111,000 people were detained under the MISA. Press-gagging measures were put in place. The Press Council turned into an agency for government propaganda. Constitutional reform was carried out to reduce the power of the Parliament and to smother all dissent. These developments were then followed by what is commonly known as the ‘excesses’ of the emergency: mass sterilisation and slum clearance programmes.⁵²⁷ Nineteen months later, on 18 January, 1977, in an equally dramatic and sudden fashion, Gandhi dissolved the *Lok Sabha* – the lower house of the Parliament – and declared that fresh elections would be conducted in the following March. In these elections, for the first time in post-independence India, the Congress Party would be electorally defeated. The period between 1975 and 1977, known as the Indian Emergency, has puzzled critics and invited wide scholarly attention on the question of democracy and authoritarianism in postcolonial India.⁵²⁸ This chapter will discuss how the economic and political crises of the period led to the

⁵²⁷ See Bipan Chandra, *In the Name of Democracy: JP Movement and the Emergency* (Delhi: Penguin, 2003), pp. 159-69, pp. 203-09.

⁵²⁸ Apart from Chandra, on this question and on the general studies of the emergency, see Partha Chatterjee, *A Possible India: Essays in Political Criticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 35-57; Ranajit Guha, ‘Indian Democracy’, pp. 39-53; Emma Tarlo, *Unsettling Memories: Narratives of the Emergency in Delhi* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003); Vernon Hewitt, *Political Mobilisation and Democracy in India: States of Emergency* (London: Routledge, 2008); Arvind Rajagopal, ‘The Emergency as Prehistory of the New Indian Middle Class’, *Modern Asian Studies*, 45.5 (2011), 1003-49; Mary E. John, ‘The Emergency in India: Some Reflections on the Legibility of the Political’, *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, 15.4 (2014), 625-37; Patrick Clibbens, ‘The Destiny of this City is to be the Spiritual Workshop of the Nation: Clearing Cities and Making Citizens during the Indian Emergency, 1975-1977’, *Contemporary South Asia* 22.1 (2014), 51-66; and, Rebecca Williams, ‘Storming the Citadels of Poverty: Family Planning under the Emergency in India, 1975-1977’, *Journal of Asian Studies*, 73.2 (2014), 471-92.

catastrophic conjuncture of constitutional emergency, and how novelists have approached the issue and represented Indira Gandhi's authoritarian regime.

The emergency is portrayed in the novels of Salman Rushdie, Nayantara Sahgal, Arun Joshi, O. V. Vijayan, and Rohinton Mistry as a mechanism for autocracy and personal profit, with depictions of a powerful and mysterious high command, a corrupt bureaucracy, and the infliction of suffering on the public from above. In many of the novels, Gandhi's character is not presented in person, but is understood as a grand, mysterious, larger-than-life force that controls the lives of people from outside. Her mammoth and evil power is concretised through the severe adverse effects that her emergency measures have on the poor and the weak. The novels situate the emergency primarily within the realist discourses of class struggle, caste consciousness, and bodily oppression, but the writers also employ a number of aesthetic modes to meaningfully engage with the puzzle and crisis of the period. Sahgal, for instance, focuses mainly on the elite and ruling classes and their corrupt politics in the postcolonial aftermath; her narrator and protagonists see the world of the emergency from the top and ignore the damage being inflicted on the lower classes. On the other hand, Rohinton Mistry reverses the angle and highlights the suffering of the lower castes, lower classes, and marginal communities during the period. The aesthetic modes used by the two novelists, inflected by their focus on class, caste, and marginal communities, could be seen as a realism from above and from below, respectively. In Rushdie, Joshi, and Vijayan, Gandhi and her emergency appear allegorically. In order to represent and to criticise the brutality of the regime and the corrupt neo-colonialist politics of the government, these writers exploit the resources of the body through the modes of magic, myth, and the grotesque that both challenge realism's rational logic and reconstruct its framework. I call this framework extra-realism or a realism from without, which I will show is different from that of critical irrationalism. The chapter will discuss more broadly this social-spatial use of realism in emergency narratives. Contrary to critics' claims that there were few contemporary 'oppositional' narratives that 'truly' represented the emergency and its measures, I argue that the creative literature of the period gives us powerful evidence of how the emergency was understood, analysed, criticised, and resisted through fiction. In addition, through an experimental use of form and mode, these novels also demonstrate their investigative as well as instructive prowess, exposing the powers

that obscure and mystify knowledge productions, and pointing to the constructed nature of ‘truth claims’ in official representations and discourses.

The Emergency: Authoritarianism, Violence, and Representation

Historian Bipan Chandra tells us that the emergency was mainly a ‘narrative’ of ‘two characters’: Indira Gandhi and Jayprakash Narayan.⁵²⁹ Narayan, popularly known as JP, alleged that the Congress Party was corrupt and unable to tackle the issues of inflation, poverty, and unemployment, and was in effect assaulting the hard-fought and cherished institutions of democracy. On the other hand, Indira Gandhi continued to speak of the need to ‘preserve and safeguard democracy’ from the ‘evil forces of destruction’, which for her stood for the oppositional voices in India and foreign conspiracies against her government.⁵³⁰ Both were using democracy as a medium or as a ruse in their fight against each other. Rather than simply being personality clashes, this fight however has a long and disturbing socio-economic and political context. The 1960s, as noted in the previous chapter, saw terrible conditions for food and agricultural production. Drought, crop failures, lack of government support, food riots, and famine not only debilitated the country’s economy, but also raised serious doubts about the Congress Party’s stewardship.⁵³¹ Taking office as Prime Minister in 1967, Indira Gandhi followed a radical reformist program of nationalising the banking and insurance sectors, and helping farmers with US-aided food grain, subsidised fertilisers, technology, and seeds.⁵³² Known as the ‘Green Revolution’, these reforms, however, solved the food crisis only for a brief period, and ended up enhancing the conditions for the richer farmers while reducing them for everyone else.⁵³³ India was then hit by an economic crisis: the price of crude oil rose sharply across the globe and soon the

⁵²⁹ Chandra, p. 2. Narayan was the leader of the coalition-led opposition party, and founded the Janata Party in January 1977 after the emergency was lifted. His party, in alliance with other anti-Congress parties, defeated Gandhi’s Congress Party in a historic election win in March 1977. This was the first time that the Congress was defeated in elections in the post-independence aftermath.

⁵³⁰ See Chandra’s work which is fundamentally about Narayan and Gandhi, and which includes some of the speeches and writings from their interviews, diaries, and broadcasts. For individual cases, see, Jayprakash Narayan, *Prison Diary: 1975* (Delhi: Popular Prakashan, 1977); and Indira Gandhi, *Selected Speeches and Writings of Indira Gandhi, Vol. III, September 1972-March 1977* (New Delhi: Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, 1984).

⁵³¹ Marcus Franda, *Radical Politics*; Atul Kohli, *The State and Poverty in India: The Politics of Reform* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), pp. 61-79.

⁵³² See Francine Frankel, *India’s Green Revolution: Economic Gains and Political Costs* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971).

⁵³³ Vandana Shiva, *The Violence of the Green Revolution: Third World Agriculture, Ecology and Politics* (London: Zed Books, 1991), pp. 171-94.

U.S. had terminated aid.⁵³⁴ This critical conjuncture was aggravated by the political crisis within the Congress Party. After the death of Jawaharlal Nehru in 1964, the Congress Party appeared increasingly fragile. With incompetent and corrupt chief ministers and the growing popularity of regional, language-, and identity-based politics, the Congress lost many of its traditional strongholds.⁵³⁵ After her election to power in 1966, Indira Gandhi attempted to take control of the situation by concentrating power in the hands of a small and trusted cabinet. While her tactics initially worked well thanks to her populist slogans like *garibi hatao* (out with poverty) and especially during the Bangladesh Liberation War in 1971, the agricultural-economic crisis, the resultant socio-political discontent in the country, and the rise of a formidable opposition party under the leadership of JP, made her political future uneasy and uncertain.⁵³⁶ Two events particularly rubbed salt into this atmosphere of turmoil. On 12 June, 1975, the Allahabad High Court, in a lawsuit filed by socialist reformer Raj Narain, found Indira Gandhi guilty of electoral malpractice (of bribery and of using government machinery to her advantage) in her 1971 election in Rae Bareilly, Uttar Pradesh, and dismissed her from her duties as Prime Minister. On the same day, Gandhi's government lost the elections in Gujarat against a *Janata Morcha* coalition. Gandhi appealed to the Supreme Court, which overruled the High Court decision, but declared on 25 June that she could not carry out her duties as Prime Minister.⁵³⁷ On the following day, after having consulted a few trusted allies, Gandhi, in the name of safeguarding democracy, declared the state of emergency by taking recourse to Article 352 of the Indian Constitution, which proclaims 'internal emergency' in times of severe social and political crisis.

The authoritarian aspect of the emergency was manifest in the immediate media censorship. Gandhi stated in interviews that a section of the press was anti-government and that there could be no meaningful use of Article 352 if the press was allowed to be free.⁵³⁸ Soon after, habeas corpus was suspended, and the Censor Act

⁵³⁴ Chandra, pp. 16-18.

⁵³⁵ See Hewitt, pp. 64-90; see also Robert Desmond King, *Nehru and the Language Politics of India* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

⁵³⁶ See Crispin Bates, *Subalterns and Raj: South Asia since 1600* (London: Routledge, 2007), pp. 230-34; see also Ayesha Jalal, *Democracy and Authoritarianism in South Asia: A Comparative and Historical Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 66-77.

⁵³⁷ See Chandra, pp. 60-69.

⁵³⁸ See Gandhi cited in Nayantara Sahgal, *Indira Gandhi: Her Road to Power* (New York: Fredrick Ungar Publishing Co., 1982), p. 152.

was imposed under the MISA and the Defence of India Rules (1971). Soli Sorabjee, who published an influential pamphlet on press censorship after the emergency, noted that this was the first time that press censorship had been applied in post-independence India, compelling news editors to submit news content as well as advertisements to the Censor Board before publication.⁵³⁹ Most press agencies acquiesced to the measures, being paralysed by the fast development of events and the extent of Indira Gandhi's power. Those that did not, for instance *The Indian Express* and *The Statesmen*, faced tremendous pressure from the state, including electricity cuts, fake tax cases, refusal of accreditation from the government, arrest and torture of many of their senior journalists (the case of Kuldip Nayar of *The Indian Express* is well known), and so on. Foreign correspondents were also denied entry into India. Through active control on media and small independent publishing houses, Gandhi sought to smother all forms of dissent.⁵⁴⁰ The only acceptable mode of news presentation was lavishing praise on government policies and the emergency measures.⁵⁴¹ Soon after the censorship was imposed, Gandhi sought to normalise the emergency by restoring the democratic institutions and bodies such as the Parliament, the cabinet, various non-governmental organisations, while also weakening the powers of the judiciary and the legislature by pushing for constitutional amendments. These amendments made a handful of people, including the President, the Prime Minister and a few cabinet ministers, supreme leaders of the country.⁵⁴² This was followed by a period of suspensions and replacements of government officials, through which Gandhi brought many areas, constitutionally under the Home Ministry's jurisdiction, within her control and established herself as the supreme force in Indian politics and affairs, giving birth to a period of suspicion, nepotism, and conflicted interests among the bureaucrats. These aspects would come to be powerfully represented in Nayantara Sahgal's novel *Rich Like Us*.

⁵³⁹ Soli Sorabjee, *The Emergency, Censorship and the Press in India* (London: Writers and Scholars Educational Trust, 1977), p. 11.

⁵⁴⁰ Several magazines and journals were discontinued, including the prestigious *Seminar*. See Sorabjee for a list, pp. 21-22.

⁵⁴¹ *Ibid*, pp. 16-21.

⁵⁴² The 38th Amendment was about the non-judicial satisfaction of the President upon ordinances, while the 39th Amendment was to make the Prime Minister a body beyond judiciary charges and scrutiny (as Gandhi's revenge against the judiciary rulings on her). An atmosphere of crisis ensued as there were arbitrary transfers of ministers and bureaucrats. Vernon Hewitt tells us that I. K. Gujaral, who was the then information and broadcasting minister, was transferred because of his obvious unhappiness 'with the way the press was censored'. Hewitt, p. 141.

After these initial turbulences were over, Gandhi expressed the desire to extend the emergency for a longer period in order to save the economy. Since India was suffering from the global economic crisis and from a long period of agricultural underproduction and inflation, Gandhi declared in July 1975 a ‘twenty-point programme’, which included various reform policies on the recovery of the debt of landless labourers, the extension of bank credit, the abolition of bonded labour, the provision of shelter to the homeless, etc.⁵⁴³ Though the economy showed signs of initial recovery, such success, as Vernon Hewitt tells us, had less to do with the emergency measures than with good monetary and fiscal policies and a good monsoon. In fact, these measures even allowed corporate managers to shed labour power in the name of structural adjustments, ‘encourag[ing] foreign industrial corporations to enter the Indian economy and dismantle governmental regulations within the state sector’.⁵⁴⁴ Corruption in governance and the authoritarianism reached unprecedented heights as Gandhi’s son Sanjay Gandhi rose to power to ‘modernise’ the nation. His name was already associated with the Maruti car scam.⁵⁴⁵ In order to bolster the urban economy and space to court multinational capital, Sanjay started two campaigns in mid-1976: urban beautification, and family planning. In August 1976, the Delhi Municipal Corporation, with orders from Sanjay and assistance from local police and gangsters, bulldozed a slum around the Turkman Gate area under a plan for the ‘beautification of the city’. In the tussle, six people died officially (with unofficial

⁵⁴³ Chandra, pp. 175-76.

⁵⁴⁴ Hewitt, pp. 129-30; these policies were less to deal with stricter implementation than promotion and advertisement of the country’s economic progress. For instance, V. P. Dutt, a political scientist who later became a nominated member of the *Rajya Sabha* – the upper house of the parliament – has published an article in *Asian Survey*, one of the most critical of journals of India’s emergency measures, commenting that ‘India before the proclamation of emergency was a rapid build-up of the environment of insurrection, large-scale violence and disorder, and civil conflict’ (p. 1125). It was only through a disciplinarian and authoritarian government that democracy and positive economic progress could be ensured: ‘Industrial and agricultural production proceeded apace. Price stability was ensured and the dogs of inflation were put under leash...bonded labour was freed, agricultural wages were fixed and enhanced [...] scarcities disappeared and commodities of common use became available in fair supply’ (pp. 1137-38). Dutt, ‘The Emergency in India: Background and Rationale’, *Asian Survey*, 16.12 (1976), 1124-38. Such a rosy picture continued almost hand-in-hand with the discourse of colonialism in the understanding of India as a country full of illiterate, backward-minded, and unruly population. P. N. Dhar, the personal secretary to Gandhi during the emergency who was later ‘replaced’, writes that for a nation such as India ‘deeply rooted in community and faith, liberal democracy is an anomaly’ (p. 229). The only possible way one could encounter this anomaly or the crisis that is routinely manufactured with the rise of people like Jayprakash Narayan was a constitutional reform, a disciplining of the chaos, a presidential form of democracy (p. 334). These claims quite clearly indicate the support that Gandhi’s emergency policies and measures garnered from the ruling classes. See Dhar, *Indira Gandhi, the “Emergency” and Indian Democracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

⁵⁴⁵ Hewitt, p. 138.

figures ranging between 40 and 150), and many were injured. This incident was famously portrayed in Salman Rushdie's novel, *Midnight's Children*, as a magical battle between Saleem Sinai and his arch-enemy Shiva (standing for Sanjay), the right-hand of the Widow (Indira Gandhi). There was a huge protest in Delhi and in other parts of the nation against this act (adumbrating a return of resistance) which forced the plan to be halted temporarily, as both the Prime and Housing Ministers avoided the issue suggestively. Around the same period, a family planning programme was in order. Hewitt writes about an ordinance by March 1976 that pays fiscal incentives to people, especially government employees, who are willing to undergo vasectomy. Though it started as a slow campaign in the metropolis, by July and August 1976 the campaign turned into a pressure programme where certain professions bearing on state patronage (teachers and clerks from various sections of civil service) were forced to follow a target fulfilment scheme. 'This led', Hewitt adds, 'in the circumstances of unbridled executive power and an inadequate command structure, to the overzealous implementation of already coercive policies'.⁵⁴⁶ He notes that by August, roughly around the same time as the slum demolition programme, unmarried males were sterilised, as were old men, because of the frenzy of target fulfilment. The programme, David Selbourne writes, was worse in the villages, as people were brought by force to medical centres which had no proper equipment for vasectomy and no provision for post-vasectomy care.⁵⁴⁷ These scenes are captured poignantly in Rohinton Mistry's novel, *A Fine Balance*, as teenager Iswar and his uncle Om are carelessly sterilised, tortured and reduced to lives as disabled beggars.

Thus, the constitutional emergency was the result of a sustained crisis in agriculture and food production, and subsequently in commodity price hikes and in governance. It was meant to bring the nation into stability; instead, it resulted in a regime of political authoritarianism, corruption, and unchecked state violence. Not only was the media gagged and controlled, any possibility of opposition was crushed through rampant imprisonment and torture of common people. As Hewitt tells us, the state governments were asked by the central government to show restraint in their use of emergency powers. Between June 1975 and April 1977, around 40,000 people had

⁵⁴⁶ Ibid, p. 140.

⁵⁴⁷ David Selbourne, *An Eye to India: The Unmasking of A Tyranny* (Middlesex: Penguin, 1977).

been arrested, of which around 34,000 were prosecuted.⁵⁴⁸ In this atmosphere of coercion and state terror and in the absence of an oppositional local media, political criticism came mainly from international presses and journals. Noted scholars such as W. Morris-Jones, Andre Gunder Frank, and David Taylor contributed to our understanding of the political and economic factors responsible for the emergency and of the way institutional structures of democracy were being corroded by the Congress Party's capitalist-dictatorial tendencies.⁵⁴⁹ Ranajit Guha, as we noted in Chapter One, fiercely criticised the emergency measures, asserting that true democracy never actually existed in India.⁵⁵⁰ For obvious reasons, such writing of dissent did not find much space in the discursive representation of the emergency, and the only oppositional dissident narratives were underground newsletters and pamphlets.⁵⁵¹ When the emergency was lifted and Indira Gandhi's Congress Party was defeated by the newly formed Janata Party, the publishing world saw a flurry of critical works: notably, B. M. Sinha's *Operation Emergency* (1977), V. K. Naraismahan's *Democracy Redeemed* (1977), S. S. Chib's *Nineteen Fearful Months* (1978), and others.⁵⁵² These works were mainly written in three overlapping genres – political exposé, prison memoirs, and public judgements – and aimed at exposing the government's repressive mechanisms and seeking, or even asserting, justice.⁵⁵³ They

⁵⁴⁸ Hewitt, *Mobilisation*, p. 142.

⁵⁴⁹ See, W. H. Morris-Jones, 'Whose Emergency? India's or Indira's?', *World Today*, 31.11 (1975), 451-61; David Taylor, 'India in the State of Emergency', *World Survey* 93/94 (1976), 1-16; Andre Gunder Frank, 'Emergence of Permanent Emergency in India', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 12.11(1977), 463-75.

⁵⁵⁰ Guha, 'Indian Democracy', pp. 39-53, p. 44. In an essay titled 'Indian Democracy and Bourgeois Reaction' published in a Bengali journal just a few months before the emergency, Partha Chatterjee and Arup Mallik, borrowing from Antonio Gramsci, speak of two phases of Caesarism in Indian politics – a first phase constituting a weak Indian bourgeoisie, suffering from the crisis of authority and taking resort to activist cadres for populist politics, and the second phase of founding an 'alliance of monopoly capital, large landowners, the petty bourgeois, and the foreign capital'. For such a historical formation, they conclude, Indian politics not only forces consent from the population and installs corruption in governance, but also encourages, in its evident links with fascism, a direct authoritarian government. They called for urgent solidarity movements and resistance by the working class and the peasantry to stop an imminent authoritarianism. Chatterjee later translated the essay and published in *A Possible India*, pp. 35-57, (pp. 51-56).

⁵⁵¹ Underground newsletters and pamphlets were the only oppositional dissident narratives. For a study, see Sajal Basu, *Underground Literature during the Emergency* (Calcutta: Minerva, 1978); C. G. K., *Baroda Dynamite Conspiracy: The Right to Rebel* (New Delhi: Vision Books, 1977).

⁵⁵² See for example, B. M. Sinha, *Operation Emergency* (Delhi: Hind Pocket Books, 1977); Promilla Kalhan, *Black Wednesday: Power, Politics, Emergency and Election* (Delhi: Sterling Publishers, 1977); V. K. Naraismahan, *Democracy Redeemed* (Delhi: S. Chand and Company, 1977); Michael Henderson, *Experiments with Untruth: India under Emergency* (Delhi: Macmillan, 1977); S. S. Chib, *Nineteen Fateful Months* (Delhi: Light and Life, 1978).

⁵⁵³ Sinha's *Operation Emergency* had on its cover 'on 25 June 1975, Indian democracy was put to death'. On the back cover was printed dramatically in heavy ink point after point: 'political leaders and

mostly followed the same pattern: beginning from the period immediately before the emergency, and describing the event not as a crystallisation of the long politico-economic crisis but mainly as a method through which Indira Gandhi could crush the dissenting voices within democracy and carry forward her personal propaganda. The narration would often involve examples of dissent during the emergency⁵⁵⁴ and conclude with the restoration of liberty from the dark days of dictatorship by the Gandhian figure of JP. The main purpose of these narratives, apart from depicting the emergency conditions, was to rouse public sympathy for the agenda of punishing the culprits (high and low) responsible for the event.⁵⁵⁵ Soon, however, a shortage of rainfall accompanied by an inefficient coalition government led to underproduction, and subsequently a steep hike in prices.⁵⁵⁶ These crisis moments paved way for a re-election two years later with Indira Gandhi's return to power, who then swiftly dismantled the inquiry commissions set up during the Janata government and covered up all data.

For anthropologist Emma Tarlo, who wrote one of the first critical monographs on this period, these political narratives and genres together composed the 'oppositional narrative' of the emergency, against the official one propagated through the government-controlled popular media and official documentations.⁵⁵⁷ But Tarlo also notes that because of the heavily tendentious nature of these oppositional narratives – such as their highly sensational tone and their prejudices, assumptions, and strategic focus on the transgressions of the Gandhian regime – they said very little about the actual mechanisms behind the coercive measures, i.e. the nexus between the repressive measures and the politics of coercion, the various layers of resistance

workers, intellectuals and journalists nabbed in midnight swoop, and jailed/press gagged, and emasculated...' etc.

⁵⁵⁴ There were independent publications of collections of dissenting articles and newspaper reports from local, underground, and foreign presses, such as *The Smugglers of Truth*, or the poetry collection, *Voices of Emergency* (which suggest the active though muted culture of dissent during the emergency; although some of the pieces of course were fabricated retrospectively to point at the existence of such a culture). Many of these political narratives referred to these pieces. Chib's *Nineteenth Faithful Months* was dedicated to the emergency dissenters. See Tarlo, pp. 32-33.

⁵⁵⁵ It is to this aim that the Shah Commission was set up to carry out official inquiry regarding the abuse of power during the period.

⁵⁵⁶ John Dayal and Ajay Bose, who wrote a book against the emergency measures of Gandhi, felt that not only was the Janata government not quick enough to use the public sentiment against the culprit Congress party members, the immense economic crisis in the following months betrayed a feeling that Gandhi's emergency probably had a logic. That Gandhi came back only two years after the revolutionary political triumph hints at the relevance of the claim. See John Dayal and Ajay Bose, *The Shah Commission Begins* (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 1978), p. 6.

⁵⁵⁷ Tarlo, pp. 31-44.

discourses, the suffering of the urban poor or the villagers – in short, what ‘actually happened’ during the emergency.⁵⁵⁸ As Phatik Ghosh has noted for the popular Naxalite literary works, these political narratives, though not always intentional, distorted the picture and disabled the premise for a sustained critical inquiry. Bipan Chandra, whose monograph on the emergency was published in the same year as Tarlo’s, also finds a similar problem of shortage of materials and critical reviews. He writes that resources on the emergency were astonishingly ‘lacking’ for any sort of objective inquiry, save a few government documents, newspaper articles, and speeches and interviews by heads of state. To tackle such a situation, he speaks of using the ‘historian’s craft’ in understanding what could have happened from what did not happen.⁵⁵⁹ Unlike Chandra who proceeds to write an official (or oppositional) history of the period from his discoveries and assumptions, Tarlo attempts to develop an anthropological understanding of what remained beneath the said and dominant narratives – the moments of resistance and dissent against the official documents and procedures of truth production. She builds her counter-narrative by reading through the local bureaucratic documents, or the ‘paper truths’, of the slum clearance, and by conducting interviews with the slum-demolition survivors.⁵⁶⁰ From her excellent discoveries, she was amazed to find that there was hardly any significant politicised resistance from the ‘subalterns’. What emerges from the interviews is ‘some sort of collective critique of the Emergency’, which compels her to think whether the official and counter-official representations are essentially ‘entangled narratives’.⁵⁶¹ For Tarlo, such a situation arises from a ‘lack of self-reflexivity’, from the slum dwellers’ unquestionable faith in Gandhi as a rich but noble figure, to the appropriation of the Gandhian rhetoric that the ‘bureaucratic officials’ were the ones to blame.⁵⁶² These findings are crucial for an engagement with resistance discourses and practices during the emergency, but it is important to note that anthropology, like history, is not beyond ideological assumptions and limitations of the discipline. What Tarlo understands as lacking in the oppositional narratives can also be applied to her own works; what she chooses to read as resistance can also be an ideological formation, especially in the

⁵⁵⁸ Ibid, p. 47.

⁵⁵⁹ Chandra, pp. 6-7; however, because of his clearly sympathetic reading of Gandhi, such a craft did not allow him to question the truth in the documents, or the politics of truth production as such.

⁵⁶⁰ Tarlo, pp. 29-34.

⁵⁶¹ She finds this counter-narrative largely ‘coherent’, celebrating Gandhi’s character and vision. Tarlo, p. 18, p. 225.

⁵⁶² Ibid, pp. 220-21.

sense that the very language she uses for understanding the politics – the language of subalterneity – is itself problematic, since, unlike ‘peasants’ or the ‘working class’, the ‘political consciousness’ of the subalterns cannot be defined in the inherited terms of class analysis.⁵⁶³ What these arguments suggest is that the role of ideology, coercion, and consent in the production of truth and political meaning-making cannot be overlooked if one attempts to understand and recover the narratives of resistance during the emergency.⁵⁶⁴

This is where I think the reading of the novels becomes particularly important.⁵⁶⁵ Unlike ‘oppositional narratives’, novels do not only present a blinkered and generic politico-historical analysis. They engage with the historical issues and also project the problem of ideology and truth production in their treatment of form and mode. Indeed, Tarlo’s work refers a number of times to some of the novels I will discuss here. But Tarlo, Chandra, and others hesitate to depend on fiction writing because of the latter’s mixing of imagination with history. As I have just argued, the disciplines of history and anthropology, and for that matter all disciplines including

⁵⁶³ There is a lot of discussion on this in the postcolonial context – from the Subaltern Studies Collective’s use of the term subaltern in a historiographical sense, to Spivak’s use in a discursive sense, to the materialist class, caste, and gender based analysis of the term. The revival of the term in current historical-sociological works by Uday Chandra, Srila Roy, Alfa Nielsen, and others challenges the term’s older use in recovering the language and politics of subaltern resistance. Tarlo’s use remains predominantly in the discursive sense more than a rooted class or caste based understanding. For a discussion, see, *Selected Subaltern Studies*, ed. by Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Chakrabarty Spivak (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988); Spivak, ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’, in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. by Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988), pp. 271-316; ‘Rethinking Resistance: Subaltern Politics and the State in Contemporary India’, ed. by Uday Chandra and Kenneth Bo Nielsen, *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, 45.4 (2015), 563-676; and *New Subaltern Politics: Reconceptualizing Hegemony in Resistance in Contemporary India*, ed. by Srila Roy and Alf Gunvold Nilsen (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2015).

⁵⁶⁴ For a note on the politics of coercion and complicity during the emergency period in the rural areas and amongst the urban middle classes, see Lee Schlesinger’s study of a Maharashtra village, ‘The Emergency in a Village’, *Asian Survey*, 17.7 (1977), 627-47; and Bipan Chandra, pp. 173-82.

⁵⁶⁵ It is necessary to remember here that the emergency literature is very wide, rich, and complex. There has been work in almost every conceivable genre of literature and culture: diaries (Jayprakash Narayan, *The Essential JP: Philosophy and Prison Diaries of Jayprakash Narayan*, ed. by Satish Kumar [New Delhi: Prism, 1978]), letters (Varavara Rao, *Captive Imagination: Letters from Prison* [New Delhi: Penguin, 2010]), memoirs (P. N. Dhar, *Indira Gandhi*, 2000), journalistic accounts (Kuldip Nayar, *Emergency Retold* [Delhi: Konark, 2013]), anecdotes (Jagmohan, *Island of Truth* [Delhi: Vikas, 1978]), cartoons (Abu Abraham, *The Games of Emergency: A Collection of Cartoons and Articles* [Delhi: Vikas, 1977]), short stories (O. V. Vijayan, *After the Hanging and Other Stories* [New Delhi: Penguin, 1989]), poetry and songs (*Voices of Emergency: An All India Anthology of Protest Poetry of 1975-1977*, ed. by John Oliver Perry [New Delhi: Popular Prakashan, 1983]), paintings (Vivan Sundaram, *Famous Mrs G* [1977]), films (*Kissa Kursi Ka*, dir. by Amrit Nahata [Vagawat Deshpande et al., 1977]), underground newsletter/literature (Sajal Basu, *Underground Literature*), street theatre (Yakshagana; *Kursi, Kursi, Kursi, Machine*, and others by Sardar Hashmi’s *Jana Natya Mancha*), and so forth. I am choosing novels for the genre’s historical links with realism.

literary studies, have their share of ideological biases, assumptions, and limitations. What literature particularly does well, precisely because of its self-reflexive nature and its unpretentious attempt at not imparting some objective (universal) truths, is to show how these ideologies are formed, practised, and implemented, and to reveal what claims these ideologies are meant to fulfil. Its form in this context becomes both a medium of social investigation and a discursive instruction in which truths, extracted from social investigations, are produced under particular circumstances, and are measured, acted out, and implemented in a particular way. This is also what Ayelet Ben-Yashai and Eitan Ban-Yosef argue in a recent study of Indian emergency fictions. For them, the field of literature is a ‘discursive battle’: ‘the stakes of this discursive battle are not only in the ways in which the Emergency will be remembered but, even more so, in understanding how the Emergency was understood – or what the Emergency actually *was* – as it was taking place’.⁵⁶⁶ I am interested in this processual, discursive aspect of fictional writing of the emergency. Literature does not only depict what happened, but also how it happened and how it was remembered over a period of time. This processual character of truth-making can give us an understanding of how the emergency was received – why Gandhi’s character is physically absent in the novels, why some of the novels present the period in magical/grotesque language, why the emergency’s effect is shown through the disabling of body and profession, what roles class, caste, community, and gender play in the emergency narratives, and finally, how the emergency is critiqued through these receptions and representations.

I will argue here that these novels take the realist form to capture the acts of human struggle against an elaborate and repressive machinery of governance. But, because this machinery is so elaborate and vague, and their consequences so widely

⁵⁶⁶ Ayelet Ben-Yashai and Eitan Ban-Yosef, ‘Emergency Fictions’, in *The History of Indian Novel in English*, ed. by Ulka Anjaria (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 162-76 (p. 163; emphasis in the original). I should add here that despite the richness of the literary and artistic works, critical studies on them are deplorably lacking. In fact, other than this essay and a critical survey of the emergency-based novels by O. P. Mathur, *Indira Gandhi and the Emergency as Viewed in the Indian Novel* (New Delhi: Sarup & Sons, 2004), there are hardly any notable works that engage with the critical questions of form, language, imagery, literary-theoretical investigations, and such. One of the reasons for this lack of engagement, or the lack of availability of material for that matter, is the Congress government’s forcible suppression of the period from public memory. As Chandra noted, there is hardly a good body of literature available for a historical inquiry. Indira Gandhi, after coming back to power in 1980, reportedly burnt all the documents related with the emergency. The dominant reign of the Congress Party in the post-emergency Indian politics (winning six election terms out of eight till today) made sure that not much sustained and critical work of any kind – historical, sociological, or literary-aesthetic – could be carried out in this field.

damaging for any clear reproduction of truth, they use a number of modes – magical, grotesque, critical realist, etc. – to comprehend how to export social reality to readers and how to employ a resistance-based reading meaningfully. Through the use of these specific modes, the novels make a case for why the constitutional emergency as a catastrophic conjuncture was different from the famine and the political uprising. At the same time, because these events are all part of the same axis of modernity and part of the crisis in agriculture and economy, there are important convergences and similarities between the ways each mode of writing is practiced. The modes of magic and grotesque share many convergences with the modes of the quest and urban fantasy in Naxalism, but there are also crucial distinctions, especially in the absence of a forceful and ruthless narratorial commentary in the former. On the other hand, the critical nature of Mahasweta Devi's writing has powerful resonance in Sahgal's, but they also use different realist frameworks. Although Sahgal and Mistry draw from the classic use of realism, there are a number of differences between their respective use of satirical and ironic modes. Furthermore, between Sahgal and Mistry, as between Sahgal and Devi, the narrative form is predominantly class- and caste-based. Although both Devi and Mistry focus on the marginal communities and castes, there are as many fundamental differences between their ideologies as there are between their exploitation of literary form. Keeping in mind these important differences and convergences, I wish to now turn to the literary works of the emergency to understand how the specific conjuncture of the event gave birth to specific modulations within a critical use of realism. The first section of this chapter discusses the novels of Salman Rushdie (*Midnight's Children*), O. V. Vijayan (*The Saga of Dharmapuri*) and Arun Joshi (*The City and the River*). These novels do not speak analytically about the emergency, but rather depict the conditions of living under emergency in a symbolic-allegorical framework. These conditions are framed primarily through the exploitation of the body, and in the effect of a realist struggle between a grand historical force and its infliction of pain on lower-class, helpless, vulnerable characters. I say 'effect' because realism's premise is destabilised through the emphasis on the irreal modes of the magical, the grotesque and the mythical. At the same time, unlike Devi and Bhattacharya, who, as I have argued above, made sustained critical readings of history, economy, and politics through the modes of the quest and urban fantasy to uncover the dominant social and cultural values, these irreal modes do not make any sustained analysis of the historical conditions, nor are their critiques as forceful, energetic, and

politically enabling (save Vijayan's) as the others. To analyse the representation of the emergency, I bring these modes together and call the framework extra-realism or a realism from without, where the effect of realism is produced through the use and the undermining of its conventions, or what Christopher Warnes in his study of magical realism calls the form's attempt to 'write back to the paradigm of realism'.⁵⁶⁷ A more thorough reading of India's postcolonial emergency realism will then follow in the second section, where I discuss Nayantara Sahgal's *Rich Like Us* and Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance* for an argument on class- and caste-inflected critical realism.⁵⁶⁸

Magic, Grotesquery, and Myth, or Realism from Without

Magical realism, as the term denotes, produces a rendering of reality where magical and realistic elements co-exist. This is not done to consciously subvert reality, as is the case of surrealism, but to capture an old society's vision of reality which is often composite in character because of the society's multiple histories of cultural subjection and contact. Fredric Jameson tells us that magical realism as a formal mode is born in a society that 'betrays the overlap or the coexistence of pre-capitalist with nascent capitalist or technological features', and thus 'disjunction is structurally present' in it.⁵⁶⁹ Writers use magic as a 'fictional device of the supernatural, taken from any source that the writer chooses, syncretized with a developed realistic, historical perspective'.⁵⁷⁰ The form received worldwide fame through the works of Latin American writers such as Alejo Carpentier, Gabriel García Márquez, Isabel

⁵⁶⁷ Christopher Warnes, *Magical Realism*, p. 19.

⁵⁶⁸ It is necessary to remember here that class, caste, and body are not categorically separate registers. It is the lower classes that suffer the government's emergency injunctions as the ruling classes enjoy the benefits. The novels represent both the conditions of suffering and of benefit through the representation of the interconnectedness of class, caste, and body.

⁵⁶⁹ Fredric Jameson, 'On Magic Realism in Film', *Critical Inquiry* 12.2 (1986), 301-25 (p. 311).

⁵⁷⁰ Brenda Cooper, *Magical Realism in West African Novel: Seeing with a Third Eye* (London: Routledge, 1998), p. 16.

Allende,⁵⁷¹ and later through Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981),⁵⁷² which is widely regarded as one of the canonical texts in postcolonial literature.⁵⁷³ This form of writing, as Brenda Cooper notes, became popular in Latin America mainly as a medium of critique both of the Eurocentric empiricist discourses of reality and of the contemporary totalitarian-capitalist regimes.⁵⁷⁴ Similarly, the use of magical realism was contextual for Rushdie, who was writing back both to Gandhi's totalitarian governance and to the Eurocentric enlightenment-oriented understanding of history and reality.⁵⁷⁵ He stated in an interview that 'The book was conceived and begun during the Emergency, and I was very angry about that. The stain of it is on the book. The Emergency and the Bangladesh war were the two most terrible events since Independence, and they had to be treated as the outrageous crimes that they were'.⁵⁷⁶ In this autobiographical telling of Saleem Sinai's three-generation family history from 1915 till 1978, which Sinai considers as 'handcuffed to [Indian] history',⁵⁷⁷ the emergency appears in the final section of the novel after Saleem is rescued from the Bangladesh Liberation War and brought back to India. The shift in tone and imagery

⁵⁷¹ Alejo Carpentier first notably used the form in his novel, *The Kingdom of this World* (1949). In the novel's prologue he wrote about his experience of the 'marvelous real' in Haiti, which he described as 'an unexpected alteration of reality (the miracle), from a privileged revelation of reality, an unaccustomed insight that is singularly favoured by the unexpected richness of reality'. See 'On the Marvelous Real in America', in *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*, ed. by Louis Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), pp. 75-88 (p. 87). It is in the works of Gabriel García Márquez, Isabel Allende, Carlos Fuentes, and others in late 1960s and 70s Latin America that the form achieved wide success. These writers used the form to situate the unexplained co-existence of logic and reasoning and superstition and myth that characterised the 'authentic' constitution of Latin American societies. García Márquez, for example, describes 'a world of omens, premonitions, cures and superstitions that is authentically ours, truly Latin American'. See Cooper, p. 16. This understanding both opened the form's use to a wider postcolonial writing and readership and made it into a readymade case for commercial success in the West. For a critical reading of the form in the postcolonial context, see Christopher Warnes, *Magical Realism*.

⁵⁷² Salman Rushdie, *Midnight's Children* (London: Vintage, 2006).

⁵⁷³ It is unnecessary to rehearse the enormous critical literature available on the work. Interested readers may consult, Ursula Kluwick, *Exploring Magic Realism in Salman Rushdie's Fiction* (London: Routledge, 2013); and for an overview and reception of the novel: Neil Ten Kortenaar, *Self, Nation, Text in Salman Rushdie's Midnight's Children* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2004); and Norbert Schurer, *Salman Rushdie's Midnight's Children: A Reader's Guide* (London: Continuum, 2004).

⁵⁷⁴ Cooper not only tells us about the critical element embedded in the form, but also how the form was used to serve academic postcolonial discourses. As magical realism was understood to represent disjunctive, composite, hybrid qualities of reality and realism, it soon became interchangeable with postcolonialism and diaspora studies which championed, courtesy of Homi Bhabha and others, features of hybridity, liminality, marginality, and ambivalence in the postcolonial subject. See Cooper, *Magical*, pp. 15-36.

⁵⁷⁵ For a reading of the history and the context of Rushdie's use of magic realism, see Ursula Kluwick, *Exploring Magic Realism*.

⁵⁷⁶ Rushdie, 'Salman Rushdie: John Haffenden', in *Conversations with Salman Rushdie*, ed. by Michael Reder (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2000), p. 38.

⁵⁷⁷ Rushdie, p. 3.

from the apparent sympathy and critical solidarity for Nehruvian democracy to that of anger, cynicism, and the permanence of a dark and bleak atmosphere characterising the emergency period has caused many critics to consider the novel a nationalist allegory of postcolonial Indian history, ‘a Nehruvian epic.’⁵⁷⁸ The anti-emergency rhetoric⁵⁷⁹ is deployed here mainly through the discourses of the body. Indira Gandhi is presented in the novel as an evil, monstrous character whose bodily features correspond to her brand of violent and deceptive politics. She is called the Widow and is out to take revenge on Saleem because of Nehru’s special liking for him as the most powerful of the *Midnight’s Children*. She never appears in the novel, but controls the events and inflicts excruciating pain on the children, leading finally to the ending or ‘ectomising’ of their magical powers, which might be said to represent the submission of Nehruvian democracy to postcolonial dictatorial rule. Rushdie uses the devices of magic (in a heavy symbolic garb) and synecdoche to represent the unreal nature of the times.

Unlike Nehru, whose bodily features are not given much consideration in the novel, Indira Gandhi seems to be a character whose physiognomy dictates her temperament and politics. There is a repeated reference to the centre-parting of her hair. Consider Saleem the narrator’s words here: ‘Her hair parted in the centre, was snow-white on one side and blackasnight on the other, so that depending on which profile she presented, she resembled either a stoat or an ermine’.⁵⁸⁰ This statement has symbolic bearing on Gandhi’s political inheritance and her style of governance. Centre-parting hair reminds Saleem of the hairstyle of William Methwold, whose property in Bombay Saleem’s father and a few other families bought and settled into after the departure of the British from India.⁵⁸¹ Since this departure was marked by a bloody history of the Partition of India, Methwold’s hair epitomises a British politics of treachery and violence which, through this settlement, India seems to have

⁵⁷⁸ Amit Chaudhuri, *Clearing a Space: Reflection on India, Literature and Culture* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2008), p. 117. Also, for a reading of Rushdie’s romanticised understanding of nation, the Congress Party, and its principle of unity in diversity, see Josna Rege, ‘Victims into Protagonist? *Midnight’s Children* and the Post-Rushdie National Narratives of the Eighties’, *Studies in the Novel*, 29.3 (1997), 342-75.

⁵⁷⁹ Neelam Srivastava writes that the novel’s ‘entire take on the history of the Indian nation is shaped by the fact of its being an anti-emergency narrative’. Srivastava, *Secularism and the Postcolonial Indian Novel: National and Cosmopolitan Narratives in English* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2008), p. 10.

⁵⁸⁰ Rushdie, *Children*, p. 558.

⁵⁸¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 121-41.

allegorically taken up and carried forward. Indira Gandhi's rise to power within the Congress Party through factionalism and deception seems to be the direct result of these incidents here. She broke away from the old Congress Party, founded a new one based on her populist politics and reform ideology, and created further factions as she could not trust her senior cabinet ministers, weakening the Party system completely in the process.⁵⁸² The colour of her hair, half white and half black, seems to suggest elements of corruption and factionalism in her government. Picture Singh, a leader of the magician's ghetto (slum) in Delhi, tells Saleem that 'the country's corrupt, "black" economy had grown as large as the official, "white" variety'.⁵⁸³ Whenever Gandhi's government is mentioned in the novel, corruption is used synonymously (for instance, in a reference to L. N. Mishra's death).⁵⁸⁴ As the novel approaches the emergency period, the styling of her hair, centre-parted and black and white, receives special meaning. The white part is thin but more noticeable against a thick black majority. If Gandhi's rise to power is marked by factionalism and corruption, the duality of her hair suggests the dual meaning of the emergency – the white part stands for official propaganda during the emergency, the narrative of discipline, order and collective benefit; and the black part indicates the unofficial, damaging, and torturing reality of the times. As Saleem tells us: 'the Emergency, too, had a white part – public, visible, documented, a matter for historians – and a black part which, being secret macabre untold must be a matter for us'.⁵⁸⁵ This is an insightful reading by Rushdie, who anticipates Tarlo's claims of two narratives of the emergency, the official one and the subaltern one. What Rushdie particularly does is to employ the figurative device of synecdoche where the part stands for the whole. Through constant references to the meaning of Gandhi's hair to symbolise her deceptive and evil politics, Rushdie creates the effect of a gigantic nature of evil that is Gandhi. Similar to this novel, in none of the major novels of the period, by Sahgal or by Mistry, does Gandhi appear as a human being (Sahgal refers to one 'Madam' manipulating the conditions from behind the

⁵⁸² Sudipta Kaviraj, 'Indira Gandhi and Indian Politics', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 21.38-39 (1986), 1697-1708. Nothing appears more appropriate as a suggestion for this national-political takeover through authority, deception, and violence, than the slogan raised by her cabinet President Devkant Barooha, 'Indira is India, India is Indira'. See Pranay Gupte, *Mother India: A Political Biography of Indira Gandhi* (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2009), p. 428.

⁵⁸³ Rushdie, *Children*, p. 558.

⁵⁸⁴ Ibid, pp. 578-79. As we noted in Vernon Hewitt's comments, corruption and incompetent bureaucracy prevented Congress from implementing the populist left-leaning reform policies after the 1971 election and from carrying out the twenty-point programme.

⁵⁸⁵ Rushdie, *Children*, p. 588.

scenes, while Mistry captures a rally where Gandhi is so far away from Ishwar and Om that all they register are an imposing voice blaring resolutely from the mics and a gigantic figure looking over from one of the huge banners, which ironically falls down during the rally). Through this device, Rushdie succeeds in showing that Gandhi was such a larger-than-life force during the emergency, that her all-consuming presence makes it impossible to represent it in fiction, because any 'human' representation of her would not be able to capture the enormity of her crimes.

The larger-than-life character of Gandhi is further suggested through her magical control of the climactic conditions during the emergency. Saleem tells us that the emergency was a time of dark weather and damaged bodily organs. Like the declaration of independence, the emergency is declared on a midnight. The irony is captured through the depiction of the reverse scenario: there is 'suspension-of-civil-rights, and censorship-of-the-press, and armoured-units-on-special-alert, and arrests-of-subversive-elements; something was ending, something was being born'.⁵⁸⁶ This evil birth of the emergency corresponds to the days of winter, fog, and violence. The period is described as one of 'endless night, days weeks months without the sun, or rather (because it is important to be precise) beneath a sun as cold as stream-rinsed plate, a sun washing us in lunatic midnight light'.⁵⁸⁷ Gandhi's dark magic turns the world into a cold place incapable of sustaining life. This is suggested in the difficult birth of Aadam, Saleem's son, who is born mute and falls prey to tuberculosis. Both Parvati and the magicians from the ghetto try their best magic spells on Aadam, but to no avail. Saleem reasons that, since the Widow wants the entire race of the magical children to die, his son's incurable disease is related with the 'macrocosmic disease' of the emergency, 'under whose influence the sun has become as pallid and diseased as our son'.⁵⁸⁸ The emergency conditions damage speech capacities as well. Saleem describes the emergency as a time of 'fears and silence': his child Aadam does not speak a word during the emergency months; his mentor, the bubbly snake-charmer Picture Singh, is found dumb for months; and a general atmosphere of whispers and hushed speech prevails. Further, Saleem, with his magical power of smell, sniffs despotism in the air. This takes place mainly after the 'Constitutional altering', which

⁵⁸⁶ Ibid, p. 585.

⁵⁸⁷ Ibid, p. 590.

⁵⁸⁸ Ibid, p. 590.

refers here to the 42nd Amendment of the Constitution when judicial and civil powers were suspended to consolidate authority in the hands of the Prime Minister and give her a near-absolute dictatorship.⁵⁸⁹ Saleem smells ‘the ghosts of ancient empires in the air [...] in the city which was littered with phantoms of Slave Kings and Mughals, of Aurangzeb the merciless and the last, pink conquerors, I inhaled once again the sharp aroma of despotism. It smelled like burning oily rags’.⁵⁹⁰ This turns out to be an indicator of Indira Gandhi’s historical legacy, which is situated not in the democratic politics of Nehru, but in the wily and deceptive British colonialism and in the instances of despotism in Indian Muslim political history. Delhi’s Muslim past of authoritarian rule seems to echo in her politics of everyday violence, in the ‘burning oily rags’. Through these dark magic and evil forces, ‘the emergency’, Saleem tells us, ‘damaged the reality so badly that nobody could put it together again’.⁵⁹¹ These opinions are given by Saleem and his slum friends through whom Rushdie seems not only to state that what is considered reality (in this case the goodness in the emergency measures) is often manufactured by the propaganda of lies, but also that fiction can use its properties meaningfully to retrieve the unsaid counter-narratives against the dictatorial regime. I will come back to this point soon.

These coercive instances lead to the final episodes where Saleem stands opposite his nemesis, Shiva, who was also born with the same magical powers as he and now works for the Widow. As Saleem loses the fight and the monstrous machines (bulldozers) destroy his magicians’ ghetto (the slum), he is transported to a jail in Banaras along with other midnight’s children, to be tortured, stripped of his powers and normalised. Saleem calls this act of cutting out the organ of magical powers sperectomy or the draining of all hope and optimism,⁵⁹² harking back to the Gandhian government’s vasectomy programme. Clare Barker reads these elements in this metaphorical novel about disabled children in terms of the postcolonial politics of order and homogeneity, where ‘aberrations and monstrosities’ are no longer accommodated.⁵⁹³ She writes, ‘the emergency is depicted in the novel as a state of exception in which Gandhi (or ‘the Widow’ as Saleem characterises her) exercises

⁵⁸⁹ See Hewitt, p. 135; Chandra, pp. 167-69.

⁵⁹⁰ Ibid, p. 592.

⁵⁹¹ Rushdie, *Children*, p. 586.

⁵⁹² Ibid, p. 611.

⁵⁹³ Clare Barker, *Postcolonial Fiction and Disability: Exceptional Children, Metaphor and Materiality* (London: Palgrave, 2011), pp. 123-58 (p. 147).

supreme sovereignty over Indian citizens' lives and bodies, dictating who will live or die, and what function their bodies will be permitted to perform'.⁵⁹⁴ The imprisonment and torture of the midnight's children and the subsequent excision of the reproductive organs, according to her, is an indication of the Foucauldian normalising measures of a modern state: 'by magnifying the terrors of normalization through the use of supernatural "aberrancies" and hyperindividualized disciplinary regimes, he [Rushdie] refracts the casual forms of corporeal surveillance encountered in everyday life and holds all degree of biopolitical governmentality up for careful scrutiny'.⁵⁹⁵ Barker's observations are astute here, but I also think that these instances are used to highlight the possibilities of co-operation and struggles of the lower classes against the authoritative biopolitical power of the state – which, I will argue, further suggests how complicated the question of democratic politics in a postcolonial society is. After suffering days of torture by the Widow (or Gandhi's agents in a widow hostel in Banaras), Saleem decides to call up his fellow 'children' for a final Midnight Children's Conference to build up hope and resistance: 'we, who as children quarrelled fought divided distrusted broke apart, are suddenly together, united, as one!'.⁵⁹⁶ But there appears hardly any hope for collective resistance from the tortured and enervated bodies. He also finds cases of intolerance and impatience existing still in the children's community. This not only damages his expectations of the possibility of organised resistance in democracy but also reminds him of the ghetto, whose Communist political struggle was compromised so much by the various factional interests and Left sectarian politics that the resistance against the repressive forces and machines during the slum clearance appeared flimsy and spineless. These disillusioning realisations thwart any optimism in Saleem when Gandhi, in the style of a whimsical autocrat, calls for fresh elections and is defeated by a coalition-led people's government composed of the extreme right and left parties. Saleem then says, 'I have managed to cure myself of the optimism virus at last – maybe others, with the disease still in their blood, felt otherwise. At any rate, I've had – I had had, on that March day – enough, more than enough of politics'.⁵⁹⁷ Saleem dies at the end of the

⁵⁹⁴ Ibid, p. 147.

⁵⁹⁵ Ibid, p. 153.

⁵⁹⁶ Rushdie, *Children*, p. 610.

⁵⁹⁷ Ibid, p. 616.

novel and his body explodes and disintegrates into as many parts as there are people in India.

This explosion calls to mind the explosion of Harbart's body in *Harbart* (not least because Harbart was also impaired in his speech abilities and considered a freak). But whereas we read a case of outrage and angst in Harbart or an instance of critical conjuncture of capitalist modernity in Bhattacharya's use of the urban fantastic mode, in Rushdie and in Saleem we find a deafening pessimism. The problem lies, I think, as much in the difference in ideological commitment between Bhattacharya and Rushdie as in their choice of modes between urban fantasy and magic (which of course is shaped by their ideologies, respectively, of faith and faithlessness in struggle-based politics). There are two suggestions to be drawn from Rushdie's ending. First, political regimes are cyclical in nature. Democracy gives birth to authoritarianism and authoritarianism brings a coalition-based democracy to the fore, whose very composite nature pushes for social chaos, requiring a strong and authoritarian rule to emerge again (especially if we consider Gandhi's return to power in 1980). Second, however, the cyclical nature of political governance does not invalidate the praxis of resistance and of sustained collective and struggle-based politics. What is important for our understanding here is the immense struggle and hope that underlie the formation and operation of a coalition-based politics. If Rushdie was pessimistic about coalition politics due to Gandhi's return to power, if he was also angry about the emergency and the dictatorial rule as he has stated in interviews, he could have shown a critical engagement with the problems and possibilities of coalition-based politics, the faith and hope that a repressed population has for that politics, rather than to refuse to acknowledge its existence or dismiss its possibilities. Similarly, if the novel uses magical aspects to both situate and challenge the order of current reality, there could have been an ending of another kind of reality, which is not totally dis severed from the pessimistic realisations of contemporary politics, but which is also an exploration of the richness and utopian possibilities that reality holds in itself, and in which magic realism as a form inheres. The pessimistic ending seems to lie in the particular use of the magic mode itself. Magic is mainly used as a descriptive fictional mode through which exciting aspects hidden within reality are captured. As Wendy Farris writes, it mainly 'reports and witnesses' through its defocalised narration and through the

mirroring of reality.⁵⁹⁸ The most sustained critical engagement through the use of magic lies not in satirising Gandhi's 'dark' powers or her control of the climactic conditions, but in suggesting how the removal of magical powers would give birth to an understanding of reality that is linear, bureaucratic, state-imposed, and non-layered. But in actual life and politics, this cannot and did not happen. The establishment of the Janata Party, as the first notable opposition party through the coalition of oppositional voices, is just one example of the potential that a pluralist democratic society holds. Indicating such potentialities is exactly where magical realism's use could have been transformative in the novel. Bhattacharya and Miéville, for their commitment to socialist politics, do so in their novels through the strategic use of the urban fantastic mode, where the current disillusionment is sublated through the possibility of an irreal class- or caste-based warfare. The rather uncritical and descriptive use of magic and the dismaying ending may find a further cause in Rushdie's cosmopolitan intellectualism which, as Timothy Brennan has noted, is marked by a broad suspicion of the national-political in resistance-based politics, and by a foregrounding of the tragic aspects of a hero's pessimism and loss, apart from championing the elements of hybridity and liminality.⁵⁹⁹ To come back to Clare Barker's observations, if the postcolonial state of India works through biopolitical means of normalising the body and disciplining the public, these means were significantly critiqued and challenged, either by class-/caste- politics such as the hawkers' struggle which inspired Bhattacharya's novel, *Kāngāl Mālshāt*, or by the current case of coalition politics and grassroot movements. The lack of any of such suggestions here makes the political view blinkered and partial. The only optimistic aspect in the end is the fact that despite Saleem's death, which may be taken to represent the death of postcolonial democracy, his body is disintegrated into and merged with the whole population of the country, suggesting that the 'disease' of optimism in Nehruvian democracy cannot be entirely eliminated by authoritarianism and dictatorship.

⁵⁹⁸ Wendy B. Faris, *Ordinary Enchantments: Magical Realism and the Remystification of Narrative* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press 2004), pp. 43-87.

⁵⁹⁹ See Timothy Brennan for a broader discussion on this, *Salman Rushdie and the Third World: Myths of the Nation* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989), pp. 35-50.

O. V. Vijayan's novel, *The Saga of Dharmapuri* (1987),⁶⁰⁰ takes up a grotesque mode for an allegorical reading of the emergency. In his first novel about the exploration of life by a disillusioned undergraduate drop-out, *Khasakkinte Ithihasam* (1969; *The Legends of Khasak*), Vijayan had already introduced some of his lifelong interests: the mythical, superstitious, local forms of knowledge production as against the rational and scientific ordering of the world; the everyday abuse of laws and rights by political leaders; and the use of deeply philosophical prose punched often by caustic satire.⁶⁰¹ *Dharmapuram*, published in English as *The Saga of Dharmapuri* in 1987, was written in the early months of 1975 and published only after the emergency due to the novel's satirical depiction of the deplorable state of postcolonial democracy. It is about an aged president-dictator of a recently postcolonial nation, which announces its power by inviting economically powerful nations to get involved in its rituals of orgy and feast. The parodic form of the novel is heavily influenced by contemporary Latin American and African dictator novels.⁶⁰² It begins with a television show of the national ceremony of the President's evening defecation and the distribution of the turds as sacred food. This unnamed nation is controlled by a strong army that arrests and tortures people at whim, and displays routinely its armoury and prowess on the street to convince the people that the country is at peace. The White Confederacy (standing for the US) and the Great Red Tartar Republic (for Russia) replenish the armouries of Dharmapuri and give the President candies, in return for which they are given the rights of extracting raw materials and minerals, and are invited to take part in elaborate feasts, orgies, and the bacchanalia.⁶⁰³ Defecation, food, consumption habits, dead bodies, necrophilia, etc. populate the novel, and are used in a deeply satirical spirit. Consider this passage:

Food and wine are great equalizers, and the euphoria of banquets has often encouraged the poorest of the earth's rulers to stand up to imperial powers; it is thus that the diplomatic services of decolonized countries have become dominated by bartenders and chefs. Now, sunk deep in food, wine, and excrement, Dharmapuri's President went on to assert that of their two countries his was the richer in tradition and wisdom. The Great White Father was used

⁶⁰⁰ O. V. Vijayan, *The Saga of Dharmapuri* (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1987).

⁶⁰¹ Vijayan, *The Legends of Khasak* (New Delhi: Penguin, 2008).

⁶⁰² See the examples of Augusto Roa Bastos, *I, the Supreme*, 1974, trans. by Helen Lane (Illinois: Delkey Archive Press, 2005); Gabriel García Márquez, *Autumn of the Patriarch*, 1975, trans. by Gregory Rabassa (New York: Harper and Row, 1976); and Mongo Beti, *Perpetua and the Habit of Unhappiness*, trans. by John Reed and Clive Wake (London: Heinemann, 1978).

⁶⁰³ Vijayan, *Saga*, pp. 17-20.

to such brag from the tiny presidents and midget emperors who ate at his table, and would never dispute their claims even while choosing one of their countries for carpet bombing. He would tell his prospective victim, with much bowing and clinking of glasses, *It is true, Your Tiny Excellency, the New World has a good deal to learn from your ancient civilization.*⁶⁰⁴

One can hardly miss the satiric punch of how decolonisation has resulted in the rise of neo-colonialism where the local elites have joined hands with old and new colonial powers. Satire is deployed mainly through the idea that, rather than the political principles of autonomy and liberation, it is food and drinks, banquets and bacchanalia that have inspired the local ruling elites to stand up to imperialism. In fact, autonomy or independence seems to mean the right to take part in such banquets with the global ruling powers (suggested through the comparison of diplomats from decolonised nations to bartenders). It is caustic in the final lines where the postcolonial rulers who eat and make deals with the Great White Father (the US) are called ‘tiny presidents and midget emperors’, who have no power of resistance against US imperialism and violence, except some hollow-sounding faith in the richness of culture and traditions of Eastern/older societies.

This description of food, defecation, and bodily discourses brings to mind Bakhtin’s notion of grotesque realism. In *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin comments that Rabelais in *Gargantua and Pantagruel* paints a sixteenth-century world that includes public use of farting, defecating, eating gluttonously, burping, making lewd jokes, sex, cannibalism, etc.⁶⁰⁵ For Bakhtin, these elements and their description constitute a ‘grotesque realism’ in which the body of the lower-class subject are used to undermine the hierarchies between high and low, orthodox and unorthodox.⁶⁰⁶ For Bakhtin and his readers, the grotesque has a transgressive, emancipatory possibility.⁶⁰⁷ Vijayan’s world is also set in a distant time, further away from Bakhtin’s sixteenth century, into a realm of the Indian puranas and epics, as indicated by the names of the characters (Hayavadana, Mandakini, Laavannya, Aryadatta, etc), their dress codes

⁶⁰⁴ Ibid, p. 21; emphasis in original.

⁶⁰⁵ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. by Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984).

⁶⁰⁶ Ibid, p. 19.

⁶⁰⁷ Bakhtin, p. 337; Justin D. Edwards and Rune Graulund, *Grotesque* (London: Routledge, 2013), p. 23.

(robes, gowns, excessive jewellery, etc.), and their language and conversational styles.⁶⁰⁸ But this is also the current time where languages of colonialism, anti-colonialism, imperialism, dictatorship, subjects, and citizens constitute the everyday vocabulary. The convergence of disjunctive spaces and times calls to mind Ernst Bloch's critical use of the synchronicity of the nonsynchronous.⁶⁰⁹ Bloch states that there are two kinds of contradictions in capitalism: synchronous contradiction which in our contemporary period is between capital and labour, and nonsynchronous contradiction, which is between the present and those elements that are 'far from alien to the present', including 'both *declining remnants* and above all the uncompleted past which has not been "sublated" by capitalism'.⁶¹⁰ By bringing together the synchronous and nonsynchronous elements, and the ancient, medieval, and modern aspects, Vijayan seems to suggest that the grotesque has become the dominant living form in postcolonial India. It is the kings, the queens, and the ruling elites who take part in the mindless celebration of the excessive, buttressed by the support of the capitalist White Confederacy and Great Red Tarter Republic, the two most powerful forces in the world. But whereas in Bakhtin, grotesque performances have a constitutive lower-class association and carries a trenchant critique and a deliberate subversion of class privileges and hierarchies, in Vijayan the use of the term appears inverted: it is the ruling elites who wallow in the excessive and the grotesque. The grotesque stands for everything that is wrong with the leadership and bureaucracy in the postcolonial world, for the disillusionment with nation-building in the aftermath of decolonisation. This is a point that Jed Esty makes in his use of the term 'excremental postcolonialism', through which he speaks of a dominant scatological means of life

⁶⁰⁸ For example, a representative section would be this dialogue between Siddhartha, a seeker of truth, and a beggar called Old Mendicant:

'Master, what do I call you? I do not yet know your name...'

'Call me Old Mendicant.'

'Oh, no,' the native son said, tenderly, I shall call you Mendicant Father.'

The Mendicant smiled once again, and said, 'You may.'

'Mendicant Father,' the native son said, disrobing himself, 'Look at these limbs of mine, limbs my starved fathers have bequeathed to me. The large and blond conqueror fulfils my woman.'

'Yet rejoice and be exceedingly glad,' the Mendicant said, 'because there comes another war in which the victory will be yours, for in that war everyone wins.' Vijayan, *Saga*, p. 42.

⁶⁰⁹ Though Bloch's idea first appeared in his 1935 work, *Erbshaft dieser Zeit* (Frankfurt am Maine: Bibliothek Suhrkamp, 1973), he elaborated his views in the article 'Nonsynchronism and the Obligation to Its Dialectics', *New German Critique* 11 (1977), 22-38, from which I am referring here.

⁶¹⁰ Ibid, p. 31; emphasis in original. Bloch does identify reactionary elements stored in the nonsynchronous, but he also suggests that the holdover from the nonsynchronous can deliver 'a part of the matter that seek a life not destroyed by capital', p. 34.

and production in postcolonial societies.⁶¹¹ Through a reading of Joyce and Beckett in the context of Ireland, and Armah and Soyinka in African nations, Esty contends that the use of sexual and excremental language in these writers' descriptions of bureaucracy and public life reflects a postcolonial disillusionment with nation-building and national life, where colonial power and overconsumption appear to be replaced by a neo-colonial politics of vulgarity and violence. Esty's reading is partly influenced by Achille Mbembe's understanding of the 'aesthetics of vulgarity' in postcolonial African societies.⁶¹² Mbembe writes that the African postcolony is marked by 'commandement', which is characterised by a theatrical representation of the grotesque: characteristics such as huge applause for the return of a head of state, grandiose celebrations of a dictator's birthday, boastful public display of achievements, medals won from the state, illegal activities, police protection of the corrupt, major deals with foreign countries done under the table, excessive lecherous forms of life, etc.⁶¹³ For Mbembe, people are complicit in the production of the grotesque: they participate in these events, disempowering each other and the heads of state in a show of 'mutual zombification'.⁶¹⁴

These observations point to the representation of postcolonial life in Vijayan's novel. A dictator's regime in a postcolonial society is characterised more by an individual's or a small aristocratic group's benefits and profits than the 'disciplining' of the nation for social equality, national prosperity and development. Requested by the two great nations, the dictator imposes a state of emergency,⁶¹⁵ calling for a time of discipline and control of the body for the betterment of the nation, while he and his coterie continue to enjoy personal profits, gluttonous feasts, and sex. Written almost twenty years before Mbembe's critical account, Vijayan seems to clearly grasp at a fundamental characteristic of postcolonial societies: dictatorial grotesquery. Vijayan, however, also makes a crucially different point from Mbembe's. Mbembe fails to locate any discourse of resistance to such a self-gratifying *commandement* regime. Robert Spencer points out this failure in Mbembe's work in a recent study of Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *Wizard of the Crow* and the African dictator novel, where he comments

⁶¹¹ Jed Esty, 'Excremental Postcolonialism', *Contemporary Literature*, 40.1 (1999), 22-59.

⁶¹² Achille Mbembe, *On the Postcolony* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

⁶¹³ Ibid, pp. 115-32.

⁶¹⁴ Ibid, p. 104, pp. 110-11.

⁶¹⁵ Vijayan, *Saga*, p. 22.

that Ngũgĩ uses the trope of public performance to critique the dominant practices and discourses: ‘the fantastic or magical aspects of a magical realist novel’ offer decryption or interpretation of the problem of dictatorship and, through their performative spirit, makes a postcolonial riposte to the elements of crime and criminality in society.⁶¹⁶ In Vijayan’s work, the grotesque is the current postcolonial condition of being and, as in Bakhtin, a mode of critique of these conditions. The element of resistance arises in the grotesque again through what Bloch calls the nonsynchronous element in capitalism. Bloch notes that the task of the critic is ‘to extrapolate the elements of the nonsynchronous contradiction which are capable of antipathy and transformation, that is, those hostile to capitalism and [that] are homeless in it, and to refit them to function in a different context’.⁶¹⁷ In the novel, the nonsynchronous contradiction (which arises from the presence of the remnants or residues in the dominant) emerges through the character of Siddhartha, the prince and young Gautama Buddha. Originally from the fourth century BC, Siddhartha, the symbol of peace and truth, enters Dharmapuri in postcolonial times, which figures as the land of religious truth and community. He is soon made aware of the social conditions of the poor, the life of deprivation, torture, and pain. After much exploration of the nation, he decides to help the people, although the novel does not make clear in what capacity. The novel’s ending is ambivalent. There is an insurrection and the rebel ‘proletariats’ lose. Paraashara, one of the rebel leaders, cries to Siddhartha and tells him that the President’s work-houses, which ‘produce’ and export human meat to the Western countries, are still intact: ‘See, my King: the canning of little children! See the slag of their bones float down the river’. Siddhartha replies: ‘Know them, Paraashara. This is *Leela*, the play of the Great Delusion, and they are but wafted along on its tides’.⁶¹⁸ Just before this insurgency, in an episode entitled ‘the Revelation’, Siddhartha is seen to climb ‘a many storeyed edifice rising

⁶¹⁶ Robert Spencer, ‘Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o and the African Dictator Novel’, *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 47.2 (2012), 143-58. Spencer writes, ‘colonialism and its neo-colonial manifestations are themselves the very epitome of criminality and that justice involves resistance to that power not its assertion or endorsement’, p. 155.

⁶¹⁷ Bloch, ‘Nonsynchronism’, p. 33. The past itself is not the solution: ‘Even the possible late ripening of what is actually incompleting in this past can never turn into a new quality of its own accord, one that is not already known from the past. That end could be served at best by an alliance, which liberates the still possible future from the past only by putting both in the present’, p. 36. For a reading of how Bloch’s use of the synchronicity of the nonsynchronous can be applied to the context of capitalism and uneven modernity, see Michael Niblett, *The Caribbean Novel since 1945: Cultural Practice, Form, and the Nation-State* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2012), pp. 132-74.

⁶¹⁸ Vijayan, *Saga*, pp. 156-57.

tier upon tier' to ask the King of Darkness the purpose of wars. He spots the king as being 'a diminutive and decrepit thing that clung to the arches of the cupola [...] Its fangs flashed white in simian chatter and its eyes looked down with imbecile evil'. To his questions, he just received a hollow sound, 'Ooooooh!'. Siddhartha then turns away from 'the demonic void and beg[ins] his toilsome journey of return, a great sadness upon him, a pure and tender despair'.⁶¹⁹ Siddhartha's reply to Paraashara about the Great Delusion seems to arise from this episode of self-realisation that there is no purpose behind wars, torture, and oppression. They are all part of the complex dimensions of time. The novel ends as Siddhartha's character turns into a Bodhisattva tree under which Paraashara is seen sitting: 'And the weapon, slung over his shoulder, lay quiet, like a child that had cried itself to sleep'.⁶²⁰ There is a sense of quietude and pessimism in the end. It is never clear from this ending whether Paraashara, a proletariat, will see the world from this deep philosophical perspective of purposelessness, delusion, and fate, or whether he will take a stand against it and wrestle out the optimistic dimensions of time through struggle and resistance. However, what seems clear is that there is some sort of a realisation in Paraashara and this realisation comes from Siddhartha, who has himself been 'enlightened' and transformed (into a tree of knowledge and wisdom in the proletariats' village) in the process of his search for peace and truth. There is in Vijayan's novel then a case of a messiah who can enlighten the poor (both about resistance and about fatalism) and prepare them against the meaningless torture and grotesquery of the postcolonial elite. These suggestions of a bond between the messiah and his followers and of the possibility of spiritual and total knowledge, remind us of Jayprakash Narayan's declaration of 'total revolution' against the corrupt Congress government administered by Indira Gandhi – a revolution of social, moral, economic, political, and psychological dimensions.⁶²¹ And herein lies a constitutive difference between Vijayan's use of grotesque and Nabarun Bhattacharya's use of filth as mode of critique. Filth is used primarily by the lower-caste, lower-class characters as a mode of social critique, warfare, and resistance; grotesque depicts the living conditions of the upper class and the upper caste in postcolonial societies. For a proper socialistic transcendence from the socio-economic conditions of postcolonial authoritarianism,

⁶¹⁹ Ibid, p. 154.

⁶²⁰ Ibid, p. 159.

⁶²¹ On this, see Chandra, pp. 42-45.

Vijayan seems to suggest that we will need a messiah-like (male) character who is erudite, patient, and enlightened, and who will educate the poor spiritually – aspects that are at a far remove from the sudden, unreal, radical guerrilla warfare of the fyatarus and choktars.⁶²²

The politics of resistance from below achieves its most grounded treatment by far in Arun Joshi's *The City and the River* (1990).⁶²³ It is a framed narrative where a young man known as the Nameless-One travels to the mountains to meet a hermit called Yogeswara, who tells him this current story. Like *The Saga of Dharmapuri*, Joshi's novel is also located in a distant, epical time, in a city called the City of Seven Hills, surrounded by mountains and where an ancient, sacred river flows. There is a mythical framework in the novel's use of kings and queens and their ways of life: people have ancient names (Bhumiputra, Dharmasena, Vasudeva), titles (the Hermit, the Astrologer, Grand Master, Minister of Trade, etc.), dress codes, and language. But they also have components of modern life: newspapers, guns and jeeps, helicopters, tape recorders and radios, limousines, etc.⁶²⁴ Much as Vijayan had, Joshi also uses a mythical mode to represent the deep unevenness of postcolonial society, where, as Jameson has noted, disjunctive times and spaces are forced together due to capitalism's and imperialism's violent dismantling of older economic and cultural modes.⁶²⁵ But Joshi does not duplicate Vijayan's grotesque mode, nor does he use

⁶²² Vijayan continued to write fiction, especially short stories, about the emergency and the resistance from below, which he called 'allegories of power'. See his self-translated story collection, especially the first four stories, *After the Hanging and Other Stories* (New Delhi: Penguin, 1989).

⁶²³ Arun Joshi, *The City and the River* (New Delhi: Orient Paperbacks, 1994).

⁶²⁴ Ibid, p. 24, p. 55, p. 110.

⁶²⁵ In his essay, 'Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism', Jameson argues that third-world texts are locked 'in a life-and-death struggle with the first world cultural imperialism', and suggests that we should not only compare texts based on their literary properties, but also 'the concrete situations from which those texts spring and to which they constitute distinct responses'. The postcolonial texts, for the violent histories of the societies that they are born in, are marked by 'generic discontinuities'. Jameson, 'Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism', *Social Text*, 15 (1986), 65-88 (pp. 86-87). Neil Lazarus tells us that this insight was first developed by Marx and then amplified significantly by Leon Trotsky in the 1930s based on the latter's consideration of the conditions in Russia in 1905 and China in 1925-27, which led Trotsky to formulate the 'law of the uneven and combined development'. For Trotsky, the commodity modes of production and the capitalist class relations do not supplant the pre-existing modes and structures, but capitalism is forcibly conjoined with them, creating a 'contradictory amalgam of archaic with more contemporary forms'. This process of amalgamation also corresponds to Ernst Bloch's concept of the 'synchronicity of the nonsynchronous'. Lazarus takes from these insights to understand the fundamentally uneven character of postcolonial society and culture. See Neil Lazarus, 'What Postcolonial Theory doesn't Say', *Race and Class*, 53.1 (2011), 3-27 (p. 13).

mythical or fantastic elements in a magical realist mode to alter the course of reality.⁶²⁶ The narrative is primarily about socio-economic and physical oppression from the top, and the struggle and resistance from below. The narrative begins with a dream of the Grand Master, the would-be-king, about 'a child from the rubbish' who will be the cause of his death. The Master thus calls for his ministers and devises a strict law of family planning for the 'mud people', the lower-class people who live at the fringes of the city, mostly the boatmen (fishermen) living close to the river.⁶²⁷ This planning soon turns into routine checks by soldiers for any new-born children in the mud houses and later into forced sterilisation campaigns. A teacher, Bhumiputra, who is enlightened by the prophecy of one Hermit that this city will soon fall, stands against these laws, and is extended support by the boatmen. Later, the protest turns into an armed struggle between the Master's forces and the lower sections of the society, accompanied by a section of the bourgeoisie, until the river floods and destroys the city. Unlike in the previous novel which provides a generalised take on postcolonial governance and dictatorship, there are a number of references in this novel that situate the novel's historical trajectory within that of the emergency period. The Grand Master's family-planning initiative is a direct reference to the forced sterilisation scheme of Gandhi's government. There are a couple of newspapers, maintained by the state, which glorify the state's current laws and policies, and spread venomous news against the conspirators, Bhumiputra and the boatmen.⁶²⁸ This refers to the newspaper *Samachar*, the Gandhi government's official daily propaganda organ.⁶²⁹ Later on in the novel, when the resisting forces stand up against the ruler, the Dragnet laws came into effect,⁶³⁰ which allow the authorities to arrest people at whim, torture them in prison, and keep secret files on them. These laws recall the measures taken during the emergency under the Defence of India Act (1971) and the Maintenance of Internal Security Act (MISA). Just before the battle, soldiers descend from helicopters and demolish the brick and mud houses with gigantic machines,⁶³¹ again a reference to Gandhi's slum clearance programme. But unlike Rushdie who has no faith in class

⁶²⁶ On the use of myths in magical realism, see Donald L. Shaw, 'The Presence of Myth in Borges, Carpentier, Asturias, Rulfo and García Márquez', in *A Companion to Magical Realism*, ed. by Stephen M. Hart and Wen-Chin Ouyang (Suffolk: Tamesis, 2005), pp. 46-54.

⁶²⁷ Joshi, *City*, p. 12.

⁶²⁸ Ibid, p. 88.

⁶²⁹ On this, see Sorabjee, 1977, pp. 12-21, who captured the state of press censorship during the emergency and the role *Samachar* played in official propaganda.

⁶³⁰ Joshi, *City*, p. 121.

⁶³¹ Ibid, p. 183.

struggle, or Vijayan who shows revolutionary class consciousness to be at the nascent stage only, Joshi gives us a picture that the lower classes are not only politically conscious, they also actively voice their demands and fight for them. When, in a public speech on family-planning laws, the boatmen are asked to swear allegiance to the Grand Master by the Astrologer, the Second Head of State, for keeping peace and social equality in the nation, the Head Boatman, a woman, responds,

Is it not true, Astrologer, that the city's granaries are full? And it is not a fact that out of the mud-people the city shall always extract work equal to what it feeds them, even as it is done to the animals, even though that cannot be said of the brick-people and of their children?... You said the wealth of the city belongs to the people. Let the Grand Master ask the brick-people to give up their wealth [...] Let the city's wealth be put to use for the benefit of all. Let the boatmen's children have an equal chance with the children of the brick-people [...] If the city still remains poor we shall gladly give up our children.⁶³²

This statement shows that the mud-people, the lower classes, are aware of the nature of deprivation, of workers' rights and duties, and of the socio-economic divide between the labour classes, the brick-people (bureaucratic/middle-classes) and the aristocracy. The lower classes are not afraid to protest against the status quo. The novel slowly builds up the momentum of struggle through the display of hegemonic and repressive practices by the state, and through the acts of class solidarity and underground and public instances of struggle put up by the lower classes, until it finally culminates in revolution. However, the author prevents us from seeing a seizure of state power by the proletariat. The city is destroyed by an ominous flood in a mythical, divine act. The reference to the seven hills and the mud people remind us of the Roman Empire and the rise of republicanism, while the flood is probably an allusion to the Biblical flood ordered by God to cleanse humanity of its evils and sins. The novel's revolutionary build-up and class-character also call to mind many features of the French Revolution: the class coalition of resistance groups comprising teachers, lawyers, educators, cobblers, peasants, and fishermen; the nature of their attack, destroying the property of the state through everyday tools; the hanging and beheading of the ruling elites; etc. Since a section of the ruling classes in this novel does help the lower classes to settle their own conflicts and manoeuvre the current state of affairs

⁶³² Ibid, p. 20.

for their own benefit, the novel seems to reject the building of a revolutionary socialist state from this political coalition. But Joshi does not end the novel with the flood and the prospect of complete annihilation. Rather, it ends with the current-time narrative as Yogeswara tells the Nameless-One that another city has risen from the ashes of the old one, higher on the mountains: that city has another Grand Master, with newer technology and arms, and newer mechanisms of repression and torture. The Nameless-One is asked to go and teach the boatmen purity and sacrifice, to take up the role of Bhumiputra and lead the peasants to another organised act of resistance. The Nameless-One asks, 'How can I succeed where the Hermit [who is possibly Yogeswara himself] failed?', to which Yogeswara replies, 'The question is not of success or failure; the question is of trying. And it is not your success that we are speaking of but the city's. The city must strive once again for purity. But purity can come only through sacrifice. That perhaps was the meaning of the boatmen's rebellion'.⁶³³ Rather than totally dismissing the possibilities held by solidarity-based politics or resistances from below, Joshi presents us with a framework where power, domination, and resistance appear interconnected and historical. At the same time, it could also be argued that such a stance could be taken with a relative distance from the event. Vijayan's novel was written before the emergency and calls for a messianic redemption from the chaotic and torturous politics of Gandhi just prior to the emergency. Rushdie's is one of dejection and dismay over the disillusioning turn of events in Gandhi's return to power. Joshi, writing more than a decade from the event when the Janata government has already come to power for the second time, suggests through Yogeswara's words that one has to continue to organise and resist the dominant frameworks. The point is not to achieve immediate success, but to have faith in solidarity- and struggle-based politics.

Critical Realism I, or Realism from Above

A critique of the emergency appears most cogently in Nayantara Sahgal's *Rich Like Us* (1985).⁶³⁴ Sahgal's novel shows that the emergency condition was a ruse for the nation's elite to court multinational capitalism, to make individual profit, to overlook corruption in bureaucracy and politics, and to destroy the prospects of indigenous

⁶³³ Ibid, p. 263.

⁶³⁴ Nayantara Sahgal, *Rich Like Us* (London: Heinemann, 1985).

economic development. She builds this picture through the characters of Sonali and Rose. Sonali, a civil servant who has been brought up with the Nehruvian values of democracy, collective work, and social justice, has been humiliatingly demoted and transferred because of her refusal to sign and release the contract papers for the Happyola drinks factory, an enterprise that she considers ‘totally unnecessary’ in India’s current economic condition.⁶³⁵ Rose, a conscientious Englishwoman from a working-class background (Cockney) married to an Indian businessman, Ram, in pre-independence times and now settled in Delhi, has a corrupt stepson Dev, who works for the government’s elite car manufacturing project and attempts to disown Rose from Ram’s family property. Both Sonali and Rose belong to the elite social classes, (though Rose is a working-class Londoner and is not formally educated), have ‘top-level’ contacts, and are independent and strong-willed women. But they are also removed from the centre of activity and, as we will see, suffer from their failed idealisms.⁶³⁶ The narrative, built through a combination of rational analysis and emotional expressivity, and qualified by Sahgal’s liberal feminist values as well as her experience in political commentary and journalism,⁶³⁷ appears to be closer to the analytical-emotive mode in Bhabani Bhattacharya’s *So Many Hungers!.* Indeed, Sahgal’s ending of the novel, which can be interpreted as a display of her faith in the redemptive dimension of India’s cosmopolitan heritage, has resonance in Bhattacharya’s utopian-socialistic ending. But Sahgal’s gendered liberal-cosmopolitan take on the emergency departs crucially from Bhattacharya’s mode. Where the devastating conditions caused by the famine (emaciated people everywhere, corpses on the street, etc.) determined Bhattacharya’s analytical (documentary) emotive style, the impact of the emergency in Sahgal’s novel derives from its neo-colonial drive for ‘modernisation’, which exploits India’s lower classes and the resources available to them for the sole profit of the nation’s ruling elite and foreign investors. Coercion (family planning) and consent-making (the complicity of the middle classes and the intellectuals) are integral to this brand of class-based ruling.

⁶³⁵ Ibid, p. 24.

⁶³⁶ Joya Uraizee notes these features and tells us that they suffer from a ‘tremendous sense of isolation’. Uraizee, *There is No Place for a Woman: Nadine Gordimer, Nayantara Sahgal, Buchi Emecheta and the Politics of Gender* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2000), p. 88.

⁶³⁷ Teresa Hubel comments that the structure and tone of Sahgal’s novels are deeply shaped by her politics of liberal feminism. Hubel, ‘The Politics of the Poor and the Limits of Feminist Individualism in Nayantara Sahgal’s *Rich Like Us*’, in *Nayantara Sahgal’s India: Passion, Politics, and History*, ed. by Ralph Crane (New Delhi: Sterling, 1998), pp. 78-96.

Against this, she proposes a cosmopolitan understanding of Indian culture, history, and cross-cultural values that has a much older basis than the current understanding of cosmopolitanism. This is substantially broader and wider than Bhattacharya's male-oriented, bourgeois, nationalist reading of transcendence and utopia after independence, which, as I argued, was used to redeem the deep bourgeois social and moral crisis in the 'stormy' decade of the 1940s. Sahgal's critique is also closer to Devi's mode of historical analysis. Sahgal's narrator, as we will shortly see, is historically sensitive and analytical, just like Devi's narrator who explores like a historian/sociologist the wider historical reasons for jotedar violence, state indifference, and lack of sympathy and love for the tribal during the peasant insurgencies in the aftermath of independence. Both writers also bend and disrupt the linear progress of time to situate their politics of peripherality. For Devi, it is Brati and Bashai who wage war against the upper-class, upper-caste babus (we must bear in mind the class and caste differences between Brati and Bashai themselves, of course). To give them voice and place within the main narrative, she fractures the linear realist discourses, and constructs both a quest mode and a deeply analytical and critical irrealist framework. For Sahgal, it is the rationally-minded, liberal, and sensitive upper-class, upper-caste women who are in a tangential relation to the masculine bureaucratic-political-business world. This is, I argue, a crucial element. In *Rich Like Us*, as well as in Raj Gill's *Torch Bearer* (1983)⁶³⁸ and in Manohar Malgonkar's *The Garland Keepers* (1986),⁶³⁹ which for reasons of space I am not able to discuss here, what is particularly noticeable is the writers' clearly upper-class, upper-caste concerns: they focus on the lives of bureaucrats, ministers, big businessmen, and upper-class women, as well as their lifestyles, top-tier business deals, conspiracies, challenges, etc. The protagonists do register the lower classes and communities around them and how their lives are affected by the emergency, but they are so preoccupied

⁶³⁸ Raj Gill, *Torch-Bearer: A Novel* (New Delhi: Vikas Publishing, 1983). This is a novel about a girl from a village, Alvika, who after a turn of events becomes the prime minister of India. Through the generic mixture of Bildungsroman and adventure romance, Gill tells us of the corrupt nature of cabinet ministers and bureaucracy which forces the prime minister to call for the emergency. There is a strong gender-based critique of the emergency here, which is however complicated through the adventure romance format where Alvika's transformation is understood to be driven by her personal tragedies and her lack of love and companion in life.

⁶³⁹ Manohar Malgonkar, *The Garland Keepers* (New Delhi: Rupa, 2013). Malgonkar's novel is a crime thriller where a journalist and an intelligence officer attempt to uncover the conspiracies and evil nexus between top-level bureaucrats, millionaire businessmen, famous gurus and yogis, and cabinet ministers. It is based on the corruption related to the car scam. The rendering of the administrative and bureaucratic world of the emergency is Kafkaesque in its symbolic and maze-like quality.

with their own concerns (or with the idea of saving the country) that the lower classes become of secondary importance. Their critique (in *Rich*) is directed from a cosmopolitan, liberal feminist, Nehruvian perspective. These class-based values appear to shape Sahgal's critique of the emergency as well as her critical realist mode.

As Jawaharlal Nehru's niece and Indira Gandhi's cousin, Nayantara Sahgal grew up in a socially and politically elite family with a rich historical legacy in anti-colonial struggles; she knew Indira Gandhi very well. She looked up to Nehru as her role model.⁶⁴⁰ This is most evident in the novel, *A Situation in New Delhi* (1977), which begins with the ominous statement, 'Shivraj was dead'.⁶⁴¹ Shivraj here is a foil for Nehru, whose death, the novel shows, brings forth a regime of political manoeuvring and conspiracies within the Congress Party, and an unstoppable rise in social chaos, political agitation, and violence. In *Rich Like Us*, this aspect is forwarded through the consciousness of Sonali. Sonali joins the civil services, like many of her civil servant compatriots, with the Nehruvian dream of building the nation: "'We" were bound by more than a discipline. We partook of a mystique. Our job was to stay free of the political circus'.⁶⁴² But she soon realises that this tradition, this zeal and fervour for collectivised nation-building is no longer applicable – the idea that 'so long as I handled my files properly and made the right recommendations'⁶⁴³, change for the better would come. There has already been a sea-change in politics and governance. Politicians now use a corrupt bureaucracy to forge private relations with big business (Sonali identifies this corruption in the character of Ravi Kachru, a top-level bureaucrat who was once her fiancé). Civil services are a bargaining medium between multinational companies, such as the Happyola drinks factory which plans to set up a factory in India, and a welcoming state that implements market economy through political authoritarianism and the crushing of all democratic dissent. This realisation has a particular global context. After the post-1945 'boom' period, marked by a historic compromise between capital and labour, from the 1960s onward there was a

⁶⁴⁰ In both her autobiographies, *Prison and Chocolate Cake* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1954) and *From Fear Set Free* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1962), Nehru appears to be a consummate conciliator of the ancient Indian virtues of tolerance, patience, and learning, and of the modern European values of reason, development, and democracy. See also in this context her biography by Ritu Menon, especially the first chapter. Menon, *Out of Line: A Literary and Political Biography of Nayantara Sahgal* (Delhi: Fourth Estate, 2014), pp. 3-50.

⁶⁴¹ Nayantara Sahgal, *A Situation in New Delhi* (Delhi: Penguin Books, 1988), p. 5.

⁶⁴² Sahgal, *Rich*, p. 24.

⁶⁴³ *Ibid*, p. 31.

wide stagnation in economic growth, fundamentally a mark of the final incompatibility between capitalist class relations and social democracy. As Neil Lazarus writes, ‘The various socio-economic contradictions that had been masked and exacerbated by the social democratic class compromise of Fordism began (once again) in the late 1960s and early 1970s to stage themselves as the sites of open confrontation’.⁶⁴⁴ This required, for the capitalist core nations, an entire ‘economic restructuring’, both in terms of social relations of production, and of technological dimensions of production. For the postcolonial nations, in the early years after decolonisation (mostly the 1950s and the 1960s), there was a dominant atmosphere of happiness, of ‘heady expectancy, dynamism, a sense of uplift and vibrant hopefulness’.⁶⁴⁵ But as the period of expansion ended sometime between 1968 and 1971, Samir Amin tells us, the world system entered a phase of structural crisis, with falling rates of profit in industrial nations, unemployment, inflation, and attendant social crises.⁶⁴⁶ The postcolonial nations, which had been depending on foreign debt, faced the rigours of structural adjustment programmes (SAPs) imposed in the wake of ‘economic restructuring’ of the core capitalist nations. This period in India, as we noted in the previous chapter, was marked by wide unemployment, inflation, industrial recession, poverty, and squalor, as well as the concentration of wealth in a few hands. As famine and starvation conditions became widespread, Gandhi and her Congress Party began to borrow food-grains and chemical fertilisers from the US. This drive gave birth to the Green Revolution in India, but resulted not in equitable social distribution of wealth, but rather class entrenchment of the rich farmers. When the US terminated aid, the debt-ravaged economy had to face stringent measures from international financial institutions, which came in the manner of huge cuts in government spending; opening up of local markets for imported goods and social

⁶⁴⁴ Neil Lazarus, ‘The Global Dispensation since 1945’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Postcolonial Literary Studies*, ed. by Neil Lazarus (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 19-40 (p. 23).

⁶⁴⁵ Ibid, p. 31. Lazarus captures the bourgeois-nationalist developments of the period cogently: ‘The newly inaugurated postcolonial regimes undertook all manner of ambitious projects intended to improve the livelihood and welfare of their citizenry, from literacy and adult education campaigns to the construction and provision of hospitals, from the building of roads and sewage facilities to vast irrigation schemes (as most notably in the Sudan, for instance), and from the redistribution of land to the outlawing of feudal rights over the labour of others. Here women were granted the right to vote, and to own property. There, workers were granted the right to organize and strike. Still, elsewhere compulsory education of children was introduced. Constitutions were framed; new laws were passed; many tyrannical and bitterly resented colonial laws and edicts were struck down’ (p. 34).

⁶⁴⁶ Samir Amin, *Capitalism in the Age of Globalization: The Management of Contemporary Society* (London: Zed, 1997), p. 147.

services; the removal of all restrictions on foreign investment; and deregulation in all sectors to ensure that all developments are driven by the logic of the market rather than by social need or government policy.⁶⁴⁷ This was the beginning of market economy in India installed through the links with the civil services and an authoritarian nature of the government – a nature, Sahgal notes, which was marked by a combination of populist rhetoric, the debilitation of the Party system, the encouragement of mistrust amongst senior members, and the concentration of power. These features, she argues, were absent in Gandhi's predecessors, and prepared the grounds for the state of emergency to arrive in a constitutional democracy.⁶⁴⁸

Rich Like Us begins in this historical conjuncture when free marketeering was given the green light in India. In the opening pages we are shown that there is a deal taking place in Dev's house. Dev is a businessman's son who is not interested in continuing his father's garment and boutique business, but wants a short cut to riches and power by acting as an 'entrepreneur'. In this episode, he facilitates a negotiation between the government and a foreign investor, Mr. Neuman, who plans to buy land in the outskirts of Delhi. Rose knows of Dev's weak business acumen and is suspicious of his blind faith in the entrepreneurship-based free-market model of business. Although she is not formally educated, she has learnt from her father-in-law and her husband that there is no alternative to hard work and good customer relations in business. Dev's wife Nishi supports her husband and promotes his agenda. In the opening lines of the novel, Sahgal problematises the postcolonial ruling elite's ready welcome of the free market through the device of irony:

⁶⁴⁷ On this, see Francine Frankel, 'Compulsion and Social Change: Is Authoritarianism the Solution to India's Economic Development Problems', in *The State and Development in the Third World*, ed. by Atul Kohli (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), pp. 143-68; for the coercive installation of SAPs in the Third World by the US-led financial institutions, see Walden Bello, Shea Cunningham, and Bill Rau, *Dark Victory: The United States and Global Poverty* (London: Pluto, 1999), p. 27.

⁶⁴⁸ Consider this passage: 'Mrs Gandhi's style arises out of values fundamentally different from those of her two predecessors, Jawaharlal Nehru and Lal Bahadur Shastri. The essence of Indian politics in their time was the recognition that India needed the democratic process for the education, integration, and development of her large and diverse society [...] Under Mrs Gandhi, this climate, along with the political structures it involved, the debate and dissent it had encouraged, and the human give-and-take it had engendered, both within the ruling party and between the ruling party and the Opposition, began to be eroded. The creation of a highly centralized governing apparatus and party machine under her personal command and the growth of a personality cult were accompanied by assaults on the institutional framework of democracy. The emergency of 1975-77 provided the setting for a one-party system, hugely enlarged executive powers, and a dynastic succession'. Nayantara Sahgal, *Indira Gandhi*, p. xiii.

The richer the host, the later dinner was served. Dining late was a status symbol, like Scotch whiskey, five times the price of Indian, and the imported car, a particularly costly luxury, that had brought him here from the hotel. 'The first thing those local elites do – not to mention their presidents or generals or whoever's at the top – is to get themselves the biggest, latest model foreign cars,' he had been told in his briefing before this trip, 'and why not? We like the way we live. We can't blame them for wanting to live like us. Besides, it's what makes them ready to buy what we have to sell.'

'Won't you have another drink, Mr. Neuman?' his hostess offered.

'I still have some, thank you.'

'It's Scotch.'⁶⁴⁹

Note the similarity in the description of the postcolonial elite between this novel and the episode we referred to in Vijayan's *The Saga of Dharmapuri*, in which the postcolonial elite and government heads appears to brag about their culture and wisdom to their neo-colonial merchant friends and to engage in a politics of individual profit-seeking. Both Sahgal and Vijayan focus on the element of eating and drinking excessively. Importing trendy and expensive material from the West and sharing it with the elite from the West is a symbol of prestige and culture for the postcolonial elites. It serves as a declaration that, despite centuries of colonisation, the postcolonial elites walk the same line on economic power and culture as their erstwhile Western overlords. The excessive displays of wealth and sex and the use of emergency measures to fulfil the conditions for their profitable businesses appear to be characteristic of the Indian postcolonial ruling elite. Despite these connections, there are also important differences in their use of literary modes. Vijayan employs the grotesque where excess, waste, and bodily practices (sexual-libidinal as well as legal-political) are captured through the necromantic and excremental use of the body. His mode choice is shaped by his vision that these elements are integral to postcolonial Indian society and that we would need a JP-like messiah figure to cleanse us through a total revolution. Sahgal's philosophy and politics, as we have been arguing, are different. The main object of her critique is not the postcolonial elite's excessive use of wealth and body, but rather how the ruling elites combine and use force to make space for foreign investment and class rule. Sonali knows that this constitutional

⁶⁴⁹ Sahgal, *Rich*, p. 7.

emergency has no basis. A crisis born out of political and economic instability can be effectively controlled if politics and civil services are made to run separately and run well. There have been bigger emergencies in the past: ‘They [the civil servants] [have] dealt with all kinds, partition, famine, war, refugees on a scale so monumental it made refugees of all disasters till then and many after look like minor migrations’.⁶⁵⁰ Rather, this emergency is an entrenchment of class, a consolidation of dynastic rule: ‘We were all taking part in a thinly disguised masquerade, preparing the stage for family rule’.⁶⁵¹ This rule is maintained by the current blurring of civil services and politics, and by the new style of governance where corruption and authoritarianism go hand in hand. She can now see that many of the events that she has recently witnessed, private and public – from her demotion and the nationalisation of banks to the crushing of all political dissent and the populism of ‘garibi hatao’ – are just part of a bigger plan of the constitutional emergency to prepare the way to the entry of direct foreign investment in India and to discipline the postcolonial public: ‘The same soundless nudge that handed me in the ditch had carted thousands off to jail, swept hundreds more out of sight to distant ‘colonies’ to live, herded as many like animals to sterilisation centres’.⁶⁵² She can see that there is a takeover of the state apparatus by a new economically ‘liberal’ class fraction, and that the Indian public does not rise up in protest at this (local) takeover. Sonali is ‘amazed’: ‘What if there was a collective will to cowardice, when men and women in their millions, a whole nationful, did cowardly deeds? Was there a way out of that?’.⁶⁵³ Although Sonali is not entirely correct here, since, as we have seen in the previous chapter, there have been a number of peasant insurgencies and labour militancy against the (global) structural coercion, this is exactly what the emergency was meant to be: a rule of terror through coercion and consent to pave way for the easy transition to market economy. As Dev says to Neuman, now that the country is under emergency laws, ‘things can go full steam ahead without delays and weighing pros and cons for ever’.⁶⁵⁴

In many of her lectures and essays given between the late 1980s and late 1990s, Sahgal points out this current form of global governance where every society,

⁶⁵⁰ Ibid, p. 26.

⁶⁵¹ Ibid, p. 26.

⁶⁵² Ibid, p. 28.

⁶⁵³ Ibid, p. 30.

⁶⁵⁴ Ibid, p. 8.

impoverished by imperialism and colonialism, is made to serve the West (US) through its submission to the 'free' market. She writes: 'who we are, is further complicated by the fact that the west is still The World and we are more shadow than substance [...] and now this new empire, of managers of the global economy, who warn us we will have no existence unless we toe the line'.⁶⁵⁵ Through Dev, and Ravi, the civil servant, Sahgal depicts India's gradual opening to the forces of capitalist globalisation. Dev considers himself an entrepreneur who is helping to make India modern, and is aware of the profits that he can make easily. Rose knows that in Dev's promotion of entrepreneurship, which involves no hard work or no commitment on his part to land, property or nation, there is no business but mainly the looting of money from the public: 'the business is minding itself and you are sitting pretty with the loot'.⁶⁵⁶ Sahgal clearly suggests that this model is a new form of imperialism where the global ruling elites and the postcolonial ruling elites work together to exploit territories and resources through authoritarianism. This new imperialism works through a new form: a total subservience to technology. As Sahgal writes in one of her essays, countries in the Third World are slaves to the new empire of globalised capitalism: 'The new imperialism is an absentee push-button affair and involves no human presence at all, only profits'.⁶⁵⁷ Push-button refers to the wide geographical control through technology that characterises this global form of imperialism. In the novel, Sahgal calls this a 'turn-key' economy. In the meeting with Neuman, Ravi tells everyone that the country is now shifting towards an advanced economy where one will have to just turn the key and all 'secrets of ownership, control, importance' will be out in a minute. This suggests the simultaneous rise of entrepreneurship and digital technology which is constitutive of the current stage of market economy. This rise indicates the new economic turn towards the service industry, where management of data and of human resources is of paramount importance rather than the traditional capitalist resources of labour and land.⁶⁵⁸

Sahgal subjectivises the social relations derived from this data-based, numerical, quantifiable quality of economy through the compartmentalisation of the

⁶⁵⁵ Sahgal, *Point of View: A Personal Response to Life, Literature, and Politics* (Delhi: Prestige, 1997), p. 85.

⁶⁵⁶ Sahgal, *Rich*, p. 11.

⁶⁵⁷ Sahgal, *Point*, p. 88.

⁶⁵⁸ In postcolonial societies, 'service industry' is usually taken to refer to financial services, hospitality, retail, health, human services, information technology, and education.

body. When Nishi explains this hard work as ‘public relations’, Rose is outraged: ‘I’m not talking about public bloody relations. I’m talking about human beings [...] Like there don’t seem to be any more’.⁶⁵⁹ Rose here is talking about the substantial, human-based, transactional business model, which her father-in-law and her husband have followed and promoted. Although Ram’s boutique market has clients from the US, we are told a little later by the narrator that the US clients (the Goldfinkels) have visited them and are sympathetic to their cause. They are wary of the current deterioration in the quality of garments and Dev’s indifference to the business after Ram’s paralysis. This clientele-based globalised economy, characteristic of the Nehruvian protective state, is being transformed into an economy based on entrepreneurship, facilitation, public relations, data, and management. There is no human warmth in social relations, even between capitalists of different orders in the chain of commands. Humans are but numbers. This element is suggested through the constant reference to names, features, and compartmentalised parts of the body in the opening pages of the novel. Except for Neuman (who is meant to be the proper noun, New Man, for multinational capitalism), Sahgal’s narrator never names the characters – they are addressed as host, hostess, mother-in-law, etc. Nishi, Dev’s wife, is described thus: ‘her hostess was curled up on the sofa, tiny and elegant in her airy cotton sari’; “‘He’s making a people’s car’”, spoke light and bright from the sofa’; “‘Mum’s right’”, said the sofa voice’ etc.⁶⁶⁰ Nishi is not a human being, but a token of the upper class lifestyle, expensive, elegant, and desirable. Later, as her character develops into a sensitive woman who tries desperately to save her father-in-law’s garment business, she is caring about Rose and supportive of her husband, despite knowing his weak business sense and short-tempered nature. Blindfolded by Dev’s reasoning, she supports the emergency measures, until her own father, K. L. (Kishori Lal) is imprisoned under the government’s harsh economic policies. Sahgal’s narrator shows the change of character in her defiance to Dev:

‘If he’s [K. L.’s] lucky enough to get release, he’ll have to mend his ways –’

‘Stop!’ commanded Nishi in a voice like the savage scream she remembered at the end of her indescribable effort before her body was delivered of her two children, the crowning of the only two acts of her life there had been no

⁶⁵⁹ Ibid, p. 11.

⁶⁶⁰ Ibid, pp. 7-12.

stopping until the bitter end. Except for these she had always known pity and reprieve.⁶⁶¹

Nishi has never been so commanding and defiant in the narrative. The comparison to her painful and bitter experience of childbirth serves to suggest the depth of her rage. Indeed, the image here also reminds us of Devi's *Mother of 1084*, especially Sujata's pain of childbirth in her protest against her husband that she will not be pressed to give birth again, and her final defiance of 'savage scream' in the end of the narrative. Here, in Nishi's characterisation, her initial introduction to the reader as a light and bright, elegant, and desirable creature seems to carry Sahgal's mordant sense of irony, since Nishi uses her body as a commodity to save Dev from financial ruin. Her job is to please Mr. Neuman, and so she never enters the conversation other than offering him a drink or supporting her husband's point of view. The shift to a new economy requires not only the commodification of the human body, but also of a correct presentation of the body, a correct style of public relations. It is only through imitating this new form of imperialism and this new style of public relations that, Neuman thinks 'they'd be rich like us'.⁶⁶²

If managerial take-over and technological dominance are understood as characteristic features of market economy (under political authoritarianism), the coercive and consensual nature of authoritarianism are made clear through the vivid depiction of oppressive conditions and the instances of class-collaboration during the emergency. In no other novel of the period does the emergency appear with such vividness. There is presence of all the major features we noted in the introductory paragraphs – the gagging of the press, the twenty-point programme, the car-manufacturing scandal, the 'excesses' of slum clearance, and vasectomy – and also of the everyday ones – the sudden transfer of honest civil servants, the abrupt imprisonment of citizens, and the secret murdering of those who question the workings. The imposing presence of these features creates what O. P. Mathur calls a 'nausea of totalitarianism' in the novel.⁶⁶³ I will limit my discussion to the representation of family planning during the emergency in order to understand the nature of class-collaboration and Sahgal's realist critique of it. At the beginning of the

⁶⁶¹ Ibid, p. 206.

⁶⁶² Sahgal, *Rich*, p. 14.

⁶⁶³ O. P. Mathur. 'The Nausea of Totalitarianism. A Note on Nayantara Sahgal's *Rich Like Us*', *World Literature Today*, 65.1 (1991), 68-71.

second chapter, the narrator comments, ‘It did not need much imagination to sense the hate and fear inside the vans with iron-barred windows, like the ones used for collecting stray dogs for drowning, that now roamed the streets picking up citizens for vasectomy’.⁶⁶⁴ These lines evoke a pervasive atmosphere of terror and fear regarding sterilisation. As Emma Tarlo noted, this atmosphere was so dominant that some of her target participants thought of the emergency specifically as ‘nasbandi ka vakt’ (the time of sterilisation).⁶⁶⁵ What is particularly striking about this sentence is the irony in the word citizen. The image of coercively drowning a dog is already stifling, but now even humans are collected for this. They are not to be killed but sterilised, and in the state’s frenetic drive, to be effectively disabled. These humans are called *citizens*. But who are these citizens that the novel’s vasectomy campaigners capture? They are the lower class and lower caste people who the government considers are fit to be sterilised.⁶⁶⁶ That the family planning programme has a specific class basis is best understood in the scene where Ravi, a representative of the government, arranges a meeting for the ‘New Entrepreneurs’ wives’ on women’s participation in vasectomy and family planning, and on women’s role in nation-building. Nishi, who is tasked with chairing the meeting, asks the women to tender their views on how ‘to popularise the Twenty Point Programme [... and] make the emergency more successful’, to which Leila, a prominent upper class socialite, instantly responds, ‘Birth Control’.⁶⁶⁷ She tells the group that she has come to know from a reliable source that teachers have been given the directive to have a target number of people sterilised by a specific period or else they will be dismissed. This is historically true as teachers, clerks, government service holders, and middle class women, deemed sincere and trustworthy to take care of the nation’s birth control problem, were forced with a target-based scheme (and, if failing to meet the targets, would lose their jobs).⁶⁶⁸ This class basis of the family planning agenda has been pointed out by several scholars, in terms of how the Indian government actively sought ‘middle class collaboration’ to stage ‘popular consent’ for the twenty-point programme.⁶⁶⁹ The middle class was tasked to

⁶⁶⁴ Ibid, p. 23.

⁶⁶⁵ Tarlo, *Unsettling*, p. 242.

⁶⁶⁶ It should be mentioned here that the caste question emerges strongly in the treatment of class, but Sahgal fails to focalise it. She writes elsewhere, ‘I prefer to think of my fiction as having a sense of history in a country where race, religion or caste can decide the course of a love affair’, yet hardly is caste foregrounded her social imagination. See *Point*, p. 97.

⁶⁶⁷ Sahgal, *Rich*, p. 78.

⁶⁶⁸ Hewitt, *Mobilisation*, p. 140.

⁶⁶⁹ Hewitt, p. 128; Aravind Rajagopal, p. 1003.

teach the lower classes the benefits of birth control and thus to help abolish poverty. Gangadharan, Joshy, and Balakrishnan, in their sociological study (1978), inform us that the policy of family planning was related to the eradication of poverty. But forced sterilisation and cases of disabling or even killing people through this programme meant that the policy was carried out less to eradicate poverty than to 'eliminate the poor'.⁶⁷⁰ As Leila's statement regarding the teachers indicates, there was no structured programme of awareness building or gradual execution of plans, only a forced success-failure schema. Rebecca Williams points out the strong eugenic ideological current in family planning. For her, the rigorous attitude with the birth control policy came from the state's 'authoritarian high modernism'. The family planning programme, which was understood by the Shah Commission, the committee investigating the crimes of the emergency, as an 'excess' committed during the emergency, was rather 'a product of the combination of a demographic discourse with a modernising impulse'.⁶⁷¹ The state's aspirations for modernising the economy led to policies that attempted to control population and eradicate poverty, but this modernisation had a demographic aim – it was specifically directed at domestic servants, slum dwellers, and the urban poor who were regarded as active agents for the nation's economic downfall.⁶⁷² Modernisation and class collaboration, therefore, worked to intensify the stereotypical notions the middle classes have of the poor and the uneducated. This is relevant to the aforementioned quote about the vans with iron-barred windows. The only citizen that the vans have picked up for sterilisation is a disabled beggar (additionally, Nishi considers her servant Kumar a possible candidate). There is no mention of anyone from the middle or upper class requiring sterilisation, none from the group of women taking up the mantle of saving the nation from population inflation. Rose exposes these underlying class assumptions in family planning clearly when, in a conversation with Nishi and her friends at a lunch gathering in her house, she questions Leila's reason for considering it ethically inappropriate for her domestic servants to watch a love-making or kissing scene on television. Rose tells them the story of one of her rural servants: how the police routinely torture them for crop tax for the local landlords, how they kill men and rape

⁶⁷⁰ Gangadharan K., P. J. Koshy, and C. N. Radhakrishnan, *The Inquisition: Revelations before the Shah Commission* (New Delhi: Path Publishers 1978), p. 33.

⁶⁷¹ Rebecca Williams, 'Storming the Citadels', (p. 477).

⁶⁷² *Ibid*, p. 489.

women, and how this servant's wife was raped and then secretly transported to 'one of those brick-kiln-pig-hole places along the Ganges'.⁶⁷³ For Rose, these servants have been victims of rape and organised violence by the upper caste and class since the inception of history. If the poor happen to be a problem for population rise, the reason does not lie in their watching and learning from television, but in a wider system of oppression and uneven development. The middle and upper classes hold the power, contribute to this situation, and remain protected. Rose adds that if anything happens to the people of the upper classes, 'The militia will be out looking for the rascal'.⁶⁷⁴ The 'modernising impulses' of family planning, Sahgal suggests, are then bound to fail in a country where class and caste discriminations remain high, where policies are a priori founded upon and executed through class filters, and where fundamental infrastructure and educational awareness for implementing these schemes are terribly lacking. There will be further coercion from the state as it attempts to prepare the public for the installation of a 'free' market economy. There will also be frustration for the state as the poor continue to evade or resist such forced activity, such as when Leila's maidservant lies to her about the date of her delivery,⁶⁷⁵ or when the disabled roadside beggar fights hard with the youth camp members who are attempting to drag him to a van for sterilisation.⁶⁷⁶

Sahgal represents the aspects of collaboration of the intelligentsia through a few set pieces of satire. They are implemented mainly through the classic realist device of free indirect discourse. As Sonali is invited to dinner at her sister's house with four other guests – a professor and his wife, a lawyer, and a newspaper editor – the Communist professor tells them that he does not like the 'mother's son' (i.e. Sanjay), but thinks that the emergency is the only solution for poverty. His wife firmly believes that the constitutional alteration (echoing the 42nd Amendment⁶⁷⁷) is mandatory since it will 'give Madam powers to fight disruptive forces and crush the vested interests'.⁶⁷⁸ The lawyer and the editor also support the measures. Sonali is angry and thinks of them as buffoons. As in the opening pages of the novel, analysed above, here too the dinner guests are not addressed by their names but by social types and titles. This

⁶⁷³ Ibid, pp. 216-17.

⁶⁷⁴ Ibid, p. 217.

⁶⁷⁵ Ibid, p. 215.

⁶⁷⁶ Ibid, p. 80.

⁶⁷⁷ See Hewitt, p. 135; Chandra pp. 167-69.

⁶⁷⁸ Sahgal, *Rich*, p. 85.

serves to suggest that among the elite, status, rank, and position do count: so ‘the Professor’ is always ‘professing’; the Editor is always ‘editorialising’ and the Lawyer is always making sure that everyone knows he is a lawyer. And their respective wives are basking in the light reflected from their husbands’ status. The narrator enters here and tells us that ‘The dictatorship around us is one of nature’s marvels, not man-made, not “made” at all’,⁶⁷⁹ and then the statement shifts to Sonali’s scepticism about the situation and to the discourse of dictatorship that ‘the mother-and-son regime’ has brought the characters to. It again reverts to the narrator, who says that such a marvellous situation can only happen in newly liberated countries where the ruling elites are busy mimicking the contemporary ways of life of their colonial masters. This episode captures in essence how the bourgeoisie was controlled by Gandhi’s government through both the politics of fear and the manufacturing of consent. These people as professors, editors or lawyers – producers and circulators of knowledge and meaning – were deeply complicit in the production of official and representative ‘truths’. In the episode where K. L. is in jail, he meets a student from Jawaharlal Nehru University who is imprisoned for his past Naxalite links. The student tells him that he is writing a surrealist play where a dictator, who is half man and half woman, descends on earth in a chariot amidst fanfare, and throws platitudes to the crowd of learned men and political heads: ‘I shall banish poverty’, ‘Watch me remove disparity’, and so on. The crowd cheers with a ‘colossal raucous cackle’.⁶⁸⁰ This play reminds me of the episode of the PM’s rally in Mistry’s *A Fine Balance* which we will see shortly. This play is an attack on the buffoonish character of the political heads and upper middle class whose sole job is to support and take order from the high command without any self-conscience. But Sahgal also introduces an element of ‘play’ in the play’s use of sycophancy. In the play-script, the laughter of political heads is used ambiguously. The student describes, ‘And after every few sentences when he/she stops for applause, there’s this loud hilarious Ha! Ha! Ha!’.⁶⁸¹ It is not clear from the use of the word ‘hilarious’, followed by the rhetorical employment of laughter, whether the crowd is actually cheering the dictator or just laughing at the clichés. This element of self-reflexive and intertextual use of satire and farce to critique intellectual-bureaucratic complicity receives a compelling treatment in an another episode when, in response

⁶⁷⁹ Ibid, p. 82.

⁶⁸⁰ Ibid, pp. 187-88.

⁶⁸¹ Ibid, p. 187.

to Dev's comment about the imminent launch and nationalisation of the indigenous car project, Rose casts the aspersion that it '[s]ounds like the emperor's new clothes to me. First of all there's no car, and then you nationalise the one there isn't. And in all these years wot you're saying there isn't even a model'.⁶⁸² Rose is aware of the car project, based on newspaper propaganda and her stepson's endless talk about it, and has seen nothing in the last five years since the inception of the project, apart from numerous deals with foreign investors in her house, like that involving Mr. Neuman in the beginning of the novel. Unlike Nishi, Rose does not ask Dev about it or bask in the supposed glory, but casts doubt over the hypothetical project. Particularly important is her metaphor of 'emperor's new clothes'. Apart from reminding us of the Danish short tale of the invisible clothes promised to an emperor,⁶⁸³ the metaphor situates the analogy perfectly here: the 'dictator' is promised a new car by her son and close aides, and every measure is taken to amaze the world with the concept of a 'people's car', only that the car is nowhere near completion. The total failure of Sanjay Gandhi as a professional is unambiguously suggested in the statement 'there isn't even a model'.⁶⁸⁴ We also cannot miss the ironic link with the opening passage where the narrator speaks of the postcolonial elites' penchant for expensive cars. These elites, from their blinkered vision, seems to believe that the car is also what the people want, which Sahgal calls in another essay 'imperialism with a new garb'.⁶⁸⁵ Even if modernity's children dream or are made to dream of cars and expensive toys, there is not, as Vernon Hewitt has noted, enough infrastructure or bureaucratic sincerity in a postcolonial society ruled by corrupt elites to implement the policies systematically. In the end, these plans and policies become coercive.

⁶⁸² Ibid, p. 207.

⁶⁸³ 'Emperor's New Clothes' is a Danish short tale by Hans Christian Anderson about two weavers promising an emperor that they will weave a regal dress that is invisible and suitable for the rank and stature of the person in question. On a particular day, as the king puts on the cloth and walks the road in a grand procession, everyone joins in admiration until a child shouts at him saying the emperor is naked. See, Hans Christian Andersen, *The Annotated Hans Christian Andersen*, ed. and trans. by Maria Tatar (London: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2008), pp. 3-16.

⁶⁸⁴ Sahgal wrote about the failure of this project and about Sanjay Gandhi's immature politics and dictatorial tendencies in her book, *Indira Gandhi*, pp. 162-65.

⁶⁸⁵ Sahgal wrote in an essay using the metaphor of the emperor's clothes that the third-world political dispensations have unquestionably embraced the neocolonial and imperialist style of politics, encouraged by the Western world and have turned the countries into social hubs for experiments in market economy. See Sahgal, *Points*, pp. 85-86. For a general study, see her lectures, 'Illusion and Reality' (*Points*, pp. 53-65) and 'Some Thoughts on the Puzzle of Identity' (*Points*, pp. 80-92).

Finally, Sahgal uses time and temporality powerfully to redeem the visions from the bleakness of the present times. The novel uses a longer notion of history which both attempts to trace the genealogy of the current historical crisis and hints at an epistemology of crisis, struggle, and achievement. This is produced through the devices of memory (Rose) and memoir (Sonali). After juggling between Rose's and Sonali's perspectives on the emergency situation in the first two chapters, the third chapter takes us to Rose's past, and the subsequent chapters alternate between Sonali's and Rose's views and memories. In one of these past accounts, we encounter Rose's crucial memory of her settlement in Lahore and the acts of religious violence in the early 1940s. As Keshav, Sonali's father, tells her, this violence is linked with British imperialism: 'England hadn't occupied territories to give English lessons. Empire was for profit'.⁶⁸⁶ The British have either instigated religious violence for imperial profit or caused more violence by suppressing it. Their answer to religious violence was secularism. But secularism – the principle of the separation of the government institutions from religious institutions – was conceptually developed and practised in the European intellectual-economic atmosphere of the enlightenment and modernisation.⁶⁸⁷ In the colony, as a number of scholars have argued, the British imperialists followed a different rule: the rule of terror and profit.⁶⁸⁸ There was no significant engagement with the complex and hierarchical religious/social practices. In a land which has seen thousands of years of Hindu scriptural domination and hierarchy followed by Mughal and British dominations, a liberal view of secularism is ineffective and baseless against the rooted practices of religious fundamentalism, communal violence, and subservient psychology. This historical perspective is reflected in Sonali's discovery of her father's note in a trunk, which records his great grandfather's struggle against *sati*, his mysterious death, and his wife's decision of self-immolation to die a 'pure death' of *sati*.⁶⁸⁹ Her great grandfather, made an orphan, decided not to follow Hinduism 'not because of such evils as *sati*, but the evil is not explained'.⁶⁹⁰ This evil, as Hannah Arendt would say, is banal because of the

⁶⁸⁶ Ibid, p. 143.

⁶⁸⁷ For a recent reading on this, see Michael Rectenwald, *Nineteenth Century British Secularism: Science, Religion, and Literature* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2016), pp. 1-15.

⁶⁸⁸ For the differing use of law in the metropolitan and colonial context, see Partha Chatterjee, *Lineages in Political Society: Studies in Postcolonial Democracy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), pp. 1-28 (pp. 5-14); and Stephen Morton, *States of Emergency: Colonialism, Literature and Law* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2013).

⁶⁸⁹ Ibid, pp. 124-36.

⁶⁹⁰ Ibid, p. 136.

unthinking, normal, law-abiding behaviour which is practised precisely because it is normal and unexceptional.⁶⁹¹ It is widely present on an everyday basis, and follows unquestionable subservience to the scriptures, heads of state, rulers, leaders, and monarchs. The situation of the emergency and people's subservience descend from this historical genealogy in the banality of evil. They also show how women have been subjected and tortured by patriarchy for ages. Sonali's great grandmother immolated herself because there was no choice for her in a society controlled by men and their masculine, profit-making values. Two centuries later, the situation has not altered very much for Sonali and Rose (despite the fact that the great grandmother was from a colonial rural society and these characters are situated in a postcolonial urban metropolis). Now the bureaucracy and the government are headed by male figures and an aggressive masculinity of a female president, and Rose's house is controlled by a corrupt male. Sonali and Rose protest against these values and are punished. Sonali is suspended from her job, and Rose, who discovers the corruption behind the car-manufacturing project in which her stepson Dev is involved, is murdered. Sahgal's gender-based critique here suggests that patriarchy and masculinist values in a society that is both old and postcolonial will easily win if the ruling elites express no interest in the country's redemptive aspects.

One of these aspects, Sahgal tells us through Sonali, is India's glorious humanist past and its heritage in cross-cultural artistic production. The novel ends with Sonali's meeting with Marcella (Ram's ex-lover in Lahore) and her husband Brian, who came to visit their old friends Ram and Rose. Marcella tells Sonali that they are starting a project on decorative arts from seventeenth-century India, and they want Sonali, whom they have come to know through their friends, to be their research assistant. After her initial puzzle, Sonali begins to see the prospects in studying a longer history of art and cross-cultural relations in India. As she reads an account of seventeenth-century artistic diaspora and exchanges in a larger Persianite India, she is fascinated by the richness and warmth of cosmopolitanism in India, and acknowledges her debt to Rose: 'though it was Rose's legacy again, the paths that had crossed hers now crossing mine, reminding me I was young and alive, with my own century

⁶⁹¹ Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (London: Viking Press, 1963).

stretched out before me, waiting to be lived'.⁶⁹² Through Rose and through her father's diary, the century has already been stretched, and now it is stretched further to understand the wonderful exchange of love, art, tolerance, and humanism that cultures and societies have been gifting each other from time immemorial. If the immediate crisis of the emergency has a genealogy in authoritative rule and religious domination, there is also a counter-history of cross-cultural exchanges and cosmopolitanism, a history of 'great attainments in letters and the arts, with polished manners and a complicated social life'.⁶⁹³ For one to understand all these, one needs a counter-notion of time, a time that can stretch far where memories do not disappear without a trace, a time that says to Rose 'wait-for-me-I'm-coming, did-you-think-I'd-gone, convincing her nothing was ever lost, only held in a larger than human history'.⁶⁹⁴ One of the earliest critics of Sahgal, Uma Parameswaran, thinks that these historical passages are weak points of the narrative and unhelpful digressions.⁶⁹⁵ I, however, find these passages useful for the broader aim of the narrative: tracing the genealogy of evil and giving us a redemptive, counter-notion of time and a hope in the future. Sahgal knows that there may not be an 'ideal' form of governance in a postcolonial society, but there may be an education that recognises the greatness in cross-cultural exchanges and values, the wonderful history of toleration and co-existence of cultures in India, and the possibility of a longer history that makes us recognise and love each other. The digressions and the ending thus are not weak aspects of the narrative, but integral structural devices for disseminating this philosophy. If the corrupt bureaucratic world compels a satirical rendering of time, it is also to imagine a counter-reality where various devices of historical memory are used and which says as much about the author's political intentions and social obligations as about the possibilities that realism holds.

⁶⁹² Sahgal, *Rich*, p. 234.

⁶⁹³ Ibid, p. 234; it is useful to mention here that Sahgal dedicates the book 'To the Indo-British Experience and what its sharers have learned from each other'. Sahgal, *Rich*, p. 5.

⁶⁹⁴ Ibid, p. 104.

⁶⁹⁵ Parameswaran writes in her review of the book: 'One notes that the narrative technique of alternating these two stories, narrated respectively by Sonali herself and by an omniscient narrator, is not particularly successful because the two voices are too similar. One notes too that a long epistle on suttee written by Sonali's grandfather and the vasectomy raids organised by the women's committee in the new regime are clearly weighty "messages" by which one is expected to be duly impressed but isn't, because they are so unintegrated into the narrative, hanging on nonexistent pegs [...] *Rich Like Us* is a fragmented, superficial novel with nothing to hold it together either in content or in technique', p. 362. Uma Parameswaran, 'Review', *World Literature Today*, 60.2 (1986), 361-62.

Critical Realism II, or Realism from Below

Sahgal thus understands the emergency not as a sudden and isolated event, but as one that is linked both with a longer historical crisis and with the contemporary neo-imperialist drive where authoritarianism, coercion, class-consent, and market forces combine to inflict pain on the postcolonial public. She forwards this insightful and critical reading of the emergency through the conventional realist devices of satire, irony, and the redemptive notion of a counter-genealogical framework of time, which make her fiction critical realist in mode, which is filtered through the specificities of Indian history and culture. At the same time, her use of realism is thoroughly class-based. This point has been raised suggestively by Pranav Jani and Anita Desai. In an essay on class and nation in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* and Nayantara Sahgal's *Rich Like Us*, Jani argues that the two novels situate the questions of subaltern politics and voice in the narratives, but hardly allow the subaltern-based social transformation to take place. The problem, he notes, lies in their preference for a postnational postcolonialism or in what he calls the 'namak halal' nationalism, which does give voice to the lower class and the subaltern, but only to show how it is obscured in an elitist worldview.⁶⁹⁶ Anita Desai writes in a review of *Rich Like Us* that the book 'is rather like flinging a finely embroidered shawl over a naked and mutilated beggar in the street'.⁶⁹⁷ The reference to shawl and beggar is strategic here. Sonali is of affluent Kashmiri Brahmin origin, and the novel sheds considerable light on the elite Kashmiri lifestyle, commenting on the eating habits, the elaborate wedding ceremonies, and the fine, embroidered winter clothes that the Kashmiris wear. On the other hand, the novel also speaks of a disabled beggar (from Rose's neighbourhood) who resists sterilisation campaigns and tells Sonali at the end of the novel how his hands were chopped off as compensation for his claims to the rights to sharecropping. This narrative of caste atrocity in the villages and class oppression in the cities never receives sustained attention in Sahgal's writing. Jani points out that the beggar is only given a voice after Rose, the spokesperson for the subalterns, is dead.⁶⁹⁸ Characters like this beggar continue to remain at the periphery of the bourgeois text, and act as agents that produce guilt for socially-conscious upper- and middle-class citizens.

⁶⁹⁶ Pranav Jani, *Decentering Rushdie: Cosmopolitanism and the Indian Novel in English* (Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2010), p. 187.

⁶⁹⁷ Anita Desai, 'Living the Emergency', *The Women Review of Books*, VI. 10-11 (1989), 11.

⁶⁹⁸ Jani, *Decentering*, p. 183.

Desai recognises Sahgal's good intention and courageous attempt to include these characters, but comments that Sahgal's polished satiric style is 'most comfortable in the drawing rooms and the restaurants that the rich inhabit'.⁶⁹⁹

Rohinton Mistry's novel, *A Fine Balance* (1996),⁷⁰⁰ speaks to this class-based narration by exclusively focusing on the lower classes and castes and minority communities during the emergency. Mistry himself is from the minority, but from the economically influential Parsi community, and is one of the few noted writers to have written about the problems of marginality and social inclusion of the community and of the Parsi diaspora. Although his fictions mainly use characters from the Parsi middle classes, *A Fine Balance* shifts the focus to the marginalised and the weak within the minorities. The characters include a Parsi widow, Dina Dalal, a Parsi student, Maneck Kohla, and a couple of tailors from a distant village and lower-caste group, the uncle and nephew Ishvar and Omprakash Darji. Through focusing on their everyday lives, Mistry unfolds gradually how the brutal forces of the emergency affect and damage the lives of these 'minor' characters. I will argue here that Mistry's realism is different from Sahgal's precisely because of the use of this reverse perspective. Borrowing from Alex Woloch and Toral Gajrawala, I will show how the features of minorness, caste, and plurality compose his emergency realism. This realism takes from classic realism, especially in its slow unfolding of contemporary everyday life and the grand and mysterious historical forces that appear to inflict pain on citizen-subjects,⁷⁰¹ but there are significant differences as well. The historical forces and factors operating behind the superficial appearance of reality, as we noted in the Chapter One with insights from Raymond Williams and Georg Lukács, do not remain unknown, mysterious, or incomprehensible in classic realism. Realism is a commitment to uncovering and describing these forces. For Mistry, however, the force and its workings do remain incomprehensible throughout. The realist narrator is also, unlike Mistry's narrator here, deeply analytical and participative. Analysis, irony, and satire are constitutive parts of classic realism as we have seen in Sahgal's work. At the same time, this constitution and understanding of realism are thoroughly class- and

⁶⁹⁹ Desai, 'Living', p. 11.

⁷⁰⁰ Rohinton Mistry, *A Fine Balance* (London: Faber and Faber, 1996).

⁷⁰¹ In his preface to the novel, Mistry includes a quote on the relation between fiction and reality in realism from Honoré de Balzac's *Le Père Goriot*. The nineteenth-century European realist element in Mistry's novel has been a point of debate.

caste-based (liberal bourgeois). This may be the reason this analytical purchase is relatively muted in Mistry: his fiction is about the lower castes and characters from vulnerable communities who have to work hard to survive. They do talk about the emergency but not in the way that Sahgal's characters do, or for that matter, the way Devi's politically-educated Bashai talks about the minimum wage. The emergency appears here through its coercive effects, such as a gigantic rally for the Prime Minister where the tailors are compelled to go, the sudden changes in law that disable their bodies and make it difficult for them to find or keep work, and determine their fate, etc. My contention is that Mistry attempts to *give voice* to a segment of society which went through the most atrocious instances of violence during the emergency but whose voice was never heard seriously in 'major' literature or in Indian English literature.⁷⁰²

I begin with an episode from a chapter titled 'Return of Solitude' in the later part of the novel, when Ishvar and Om are about to go to their village to find a bride for Om. They now live with Dina in her rented house as paying guests, after their shanty house was destroyed in the government's beautification plans, and after they were 'mistakenly' taken to a rehabilitation camp as beggars. Dina clears some space in the store room for Om and his wife, and finds the quilt she has been making from the leftovers of clothes from Mrs Gupta's garment orders. Om looks at the quilt and says the poplin reminds him of his first day at work. Dina and Maneck also remember some past experiences from the patches of clothes. Ishvar then joins them, saying that the cambric square reminds him of the sad incident of the destruction of their house. When Dina urges that she will cut that portion out, Ishvar replies:

⁷⁰² See his interview with Robert Mc Lay, where he says, 'After writing my first two books, I became aware that they were stories about a very particular and very special kind of city, and even then I had focused only on a very small part – the Parsi Community – and I made a conscious decision in this book to include more than this, mainly because, in India, seventy-five per cent of Indians live in villages and I wanted to embrace more of the social reality of India. And so I made the tailors come from a small village and Maneck come from a hill station in the North. So while this city is certainly important, I wanted to give a strong sense of the different locales and I wanted to root the reader in those places so that he has a very clear sense of where these people are coming from and what their difficulties are now', qtd in Nandini Bhautoo-Dewnarain, *Rohinton Mistry: An Introduction* (New Delhi: Foundation Books, 2007), p. 30.

‘No no, Dinabai, let it be, it looks very nice in there.’ His fingers stroked the cambric texture, recapturing the time. ‘Calling one piece sad is meaningless. See, it is connected to a happy piece – sleeping on the verandah. And the next square – chapatis. Then the violet tusser, when we made masala wada and started cooking together. And don’t forget this georgette patch, where Beggarmaster saved us from the landlord’s goondas.’

He stepped back, pleased with himself, as though he had elucidated an intricate theorem. ‘So that’s the rule to remember, the whole quilt is much more important than any single square’.⁷⁰³

The first thing that strikes us here is the idea of plurality. This quilt is constituted of leftover patches of different times and experiences and represents a tightly-knit multiplicity. Leftover clothes are surplus and useless material, but when they are stitched together, they can form a beautiful and diverse body. At the same time, the quilt also has a specific utilitarian aspect: it provides relief from the harshness of winter. There are then a number of symbolic suggestions here. The leftover clothes stand for the socio-economically minor characters in the novel. They are a surplus army of labour, invisible and invisibilised. But together they are a functioning family, not useless and leftovers, and form a community and live by it. The quilt, made exclusively from the experiences of minority communities, suggests that this plurality is an accumulated composite experience of India’s vast lower-class, lower-caste, and minority population. Minor has paradoxically an expansive meaning here, for being the majority of India. Minority is not an unqualified blob among the masses, but is embedded with complex class, caste, and gender relations. Dina and Maneck are Parsis, and are not socially from the same caste and class as Ishvar and Om are. Dina is from a middle-class Parsi community; she has chosen to live independently after her husband’s death. Maneck comes from a relatively stable background economically, but is from the mountainous regions of northern India, which are in peripheral relation to the city (although the city is not named, it is in many ways similar to Bombay). This peripheral and minor social status continues to haunt him during his stay at the college hostel in the city, especially during the political agitations about the hike in hostel meal prices. He feels he does not belong there and wants to go home. Because of this minority, he finds it easy to make friends with Om and Ishvar who are

⁷⁰³ Mistry, *Balance*, p. 490.

also minor but through their caste status. Dina is also in a peripheral relationship to the city, first as a Parsi and then as a widow. Mistry brings all these socially, economically, and religiously minor characters into the core of the city to show how their different peripheral conditions give birth to a wonderfully fabricated minor life. But in order to do that, he has to also show the composite nature of this life. This is indicated in Dina's rejection of Maneck's request that he spend a day with the tailors. She categorically says, 'You don't understand the problems. I have nothing against them, but they are tailors – my employees. A distance has to be maintained. You are the son of Farokh and Aban Kohla. There is a difference, and you cannot pretend there isn't – their community, their background'.⁷⁰⁴ This statement is important because it begins with the notion of class difference through a professional hierarchy – the tailors are Dina's employees. Dina feels empowered now because for the last ten years she has been working day and night as a seamstress to survive and raise money for the bills, which has cost her her eyesight. The emergency finally brings happy times for her, allowing her to employ tailors and monitor their work. But she has to be strong, clever, and if needed, rude, so that the tailors are prevented from learning things that might lead them to challenge her authority: knowledge of the main order supplier and also of her vulnerability, insecurity, and poor eyesight. But this new job as a middle-woman of order and supply of clothes has not necessarily improved her economic conditions. This is pointed out in the brief description of her house by Maneck, who is her paying guest: 'Everywhere there was evidence of her struggle to stay ahead of squalor, to mitigate with neatness and order the shabbiness of poverty. He saw it on the chicken wire on the broken windowpanes, in the blackened kitchen wall and the ceiling, in the flaking plaster, in the repairs on her blouse collar and sleeves'.⁷⁰⁵ There are worms in the bathroom and Dina tells him that he has to live with them as she cannot spend money on the costly antiseptic phenol every day. Here is a picture of harsh conditions and a desperate effort at making life look neat and ordered – features that so essentially characterise the lower and lower-middle classes in Indian cities. The emphasis on cleanliness and neatness helps us to understand the latter half of Dina's statement to Maneck: the tailors are different in community and in background. Dina justifies this difference by saying, 'what about health and hygiene? How do they

⁷⁰⁴ Ibid, p. 293.

⁷⁰⁵ Ibid, p. 200.

prepare their food? Can they afford proper cooking oil? Or do they buy cheap adulterated Vanaspati, like most poor people? [...] And what about water? [...] [I]s there a clean supply in their neighbourhood, or is it contaminated?’⁷⁰⁶ There is a clear conjunction made between class and caste. Dina knows that the tailors are from a *chamar* caste, whose job is to skin dead animals; hence they are unclean and untouchable. Decades have passed since untouchability was abolished at independence, but there is still no sign of social freedom from the strictures and prejudices of caste. As we noted in the previous chapters, through the examples of Hatui people in Chakraborty’s *Ākāler Sandhāne* and the choktars in Nabarun Bhattacharya’s *Kāngāl Mālshāt*, the equation of low caste with unclean living, a product of Hindu caste hierarchy, has hardly disappeared from rural society. Interestingly, Dina is an urbanite Parsi, not Hindu. Parsis are themselves a socio-religious minority but have a respected history in the growth of Indian economy and nationalist politics. They are minorities to both Muslims, with whom they share an even more complex geo-religious and historical relation, and to Hindus in (a largely Hindu-based) India.⁷⁰⁷ Dina’s statement suggests that in the process of assimilating into a nationalist (Hindu) India and because of their urbanite location and class prestige, Parsis have in a sense Hinduised themselves, and absorbed all the intricacies of caste prejudices, cleanliness being one of them. Ironically, her saying Maneck has to live with the worms only shows how baseless and artificial the relation between caste, class, and cleanliness is. The point of gender is also important here. Mistry chooses to foreground Dina’s tremendous sense of strength and endurance. In her decision to live independently and not to take help from her brother, Dina is taken to represent India’s early postcolonial journey in self-determination; Dina’s declining eyesight may be interpreted as a metaphor for the troubles and disillusionments of an urban and hardworking India suffering from unemployment and inflation, while her new exploitation of labour may stand for the country’s subsequent forced entry into neo-colonial economy. But such a reading refuses to acknowledge her subjective, resistant, and combative qualities. Dina derives an immense sense of pride, followed by a new feeling of empowerment, from her self-reliance during the days of harsh

⁷⁰⁶ Ibid, pp. 294-95.

⁷⁰⁷ For a historical reading on this, see, *Parsis in India and the Diaspora*, ed. by John Hinnels and Alan Williams (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007), pp. 79-135; for the contemporary context, Jesse L. Palsetia, *The Parsis of India: Preservation of Identity in Bombay City* (Leiden: Brill, 2001), especially pp. 320-37.

struggles for survival. While good-intentioned, she is both a tiny worker in a long chain of capitalist mode of production, and an exploiter of cheap labour. As Peter Morey comments: ‘all characters and relationships are affected by the machinations of the capitalist economy: from the piece-working tailors and their well-intentioned employer Dina, who is nonetheless implicated as an exploiter of cheap, non-unionised labour.’⁷⁰⁸ Dina thus plays a complex game of gender and class with the tailors. She has to be strong and sympathetic, but is at times manipulative when she realises that Ishvar is soft-hearted and obedient. Om on the other hand is impatient with her, having noticed her social prejudices in not allowing them to sit on the sofa or eat with her, and in requiring them to clean their tea cups themselves. While Ishvar does not complain and takes it to be a conventional caste practice, the young Om is conscious and angry. He is often rude to Dina. Since Maneck does not maintain any class division and mingles with them easily, and Dina also becomes sympathetic to them later, Om’s rudeness gradually dissipates. The point is that they are together because they need one another. The globalised capitalist mode of production has given birth to an international (gendered) division of labour, a long chain of command, order, and supply. They know that they are all vulnerable and peripheral in their own ways. They can profit from this system only if they work together and stay within the order of hierarchy. That does not mean that the social and class prejudices disappear, but that they stand a higher chance with happy co-habitation and adaptive behaviour than with antagonism. The quilt in its various leftover patches suggests such a plurality. Every patch is different but together they interact and make a beautiful whole. All the characters here are different in their respective social, economic, and religious aspects, but through work and necessity they have come to live together and accommodate each other, forming a happy, composite, socially-functioning community and, like the quilt, relieving each other with comfort from the otherwise harsh struggles for survival.

Both this composite minor plurality and the course of life of these characters are conditioned by the emergency. The emergency benefits them initially and then takes away too much. Since the characters are minor from a socio-economic point of view, quotidian in their daily life, and busy in survival struggles, the emergency

⁷⁰⁸ Peter Morey, *Fictions of India: Narrative and Power* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), pp. 181-82.

appears as an incomprehensible and mysterious force to them; the characters do not understand what the emergency is. When the tailors ask about it, Dina, who has come to know from Mrs Gupta that the emergency is a boon for business, tells them optimistically: ‘Government problems – games played by people in power. It doesn’t affect ordinary people like us’.⁷⁰⁹ This appears to be a deeply ironic statement for the characters. Dina’s judgement that these are games played by people in power is astute. These people are never in the novel’s focus because it is a novel for the minorities who are hardly in contact with these extraordinary politicians and people in everyday life. But the games these politicians play are so broad-based, powerful, and repressive, that they creep into every part of society and affect the ‘ordinary people’ like Dina. This perspective of the emergency as an abstract, sudden, and mysterious force is constituted primarily through the incidents of slum destruction and sterilisation. Mistry anticipates the immensity of the force through the event of forcible packing of slum people at a Prime Minister’s rally. The narration here makes clear the sudden and mysterious nature of the force: ‘The early morning gathering of the red double-deckers outside the slum was noticed first by a child from the drunk’s family. The little girl came running in to tell her mother’.⁷¹⁰ Nobody knows what the double-deckers are for. In fact, the drivers when asked tell them that they are waiting for the assignments. Ishvar and Om believe that there may be a bus stop at their slum and consider the emergency to be seriously beneficial for the poor. Nobody is interested in the rally, but they are compelled by the police to attend it. On the other occasion when the bulldozers arrive to demolish the colony for beautification plans, Mistry’s narration again captures the suddenness of the event: ‘Ishvar was first to notice that the smoke from the cooking fires did not linger over the hutment colony. He tripped on the crumbling pavement, his eyes searching the horizon. At this hour the haze should have been clouding thick. “Everyone fasting or what?”’⁷¹¹ Note that Mistry uses the word ‘notice’ on both occasions, once in passive voice and the other in active. ‘Notice’ stands for a new awareness of something and a subsequent close inspection. The slum dwellers talk among themselves about the arrival of these buses and machines, and even ask the drivers even though no one knows anything initially. Then suddenly comes the order to the police and the political party members: either to carry

⁷⁰⁹ Mistry, *Balance*, p. 75.

⁷¹⁰ Ibid, p. 257.

⁷¹¹ Ibid, p. 294.

people to the rally or to destroy their houses. In these acts and in the manner of narration, Mistry clearly suggests the immensely tyrannical nature of the emergency. It is an abstract force whose nature appears concrete through the objects of buses, machines, policemen, politicians, and so on. Nobody, not even the educated, knows what it actually is, as laws and government policies during the emergency change so suddenly.

There is a repeated realisation in the novel that the emergency laws have no particular meaning. People are randomly taken to custody, detained without trial, and killed. Nawaz, in whose house Ishvar and Om stayed initially, is taken to jail because he has embarrassed his customer, a 'well-connected' person, in front of his colleagues by asking for his long-overdue money, which this customer refused to pay because the assignment clothes 'fit badly'.⁷¹² Nawaz's neighbour tells Ishvar about the MISA and that, 'With the emergency, everything is upside down. Black can be made white, day turned into night. With the right influence and a little cash, sending people to jail is very easy'.⁷¹³ On another occasion, Ibrahim, the stooge for Dina's landlord, threatens Dina to vacate the flat because the flat-owner wants to turn it into a fashionable and expensive apartment. When Dina speaks of the court of law, Ibrahim responds, 'Nobody knows the law during the emergency', for laws may change anytime, and according to the benefits of the capital owner or the Prime Minister who is the lawmaker herself.⁷¹⁴ When Dina comes to court to find a suitable lawyer to file a case of tenancy, she meets Valmik, who, not very optimistic about her situation, says 'the Prime Minister cheats in the election, and the relevant law is promptly modified. *Ergo*, she is not guilty. We poor mortals have to accept that bygone events are beyond our clutch, while the Prime Minister performs juggling acts with time past.'⁷¹⁵ There is a clear indication here of the suddenness and abstractness of the emergency that cannot be comprehended by the weak and the vulnerable. The abstract nature of a historical force, and the concretisation of such abstraction through repressive acts and machineries, are discussed in Eli Park Sorensen's Lukácsian reading of realism of the novel. Sorensen writes,

⁷¹² Mistry, *Balance*, p. 299.

⁷¹³ Ibid, p. 299.

⁷¹⁴ Ibid, p. 432.

⁷¹⁵ Ibid, p. 563; emphasis in original.

The concrete meaning of the historical force that acts on the characters' lives, on the surface, is separate from any concrete doings at the quotidian level. However, its effects are present in most of the events narrated as mediated through an ironic or contradictory series of transformative and transforming parts, joints, and sequences. At the quotidian level, it is difficult, if not impossible, to trace these effects back to their original cause, except in an abstract sense.⁷¹⁶

For Sorensen, these parts, joints, and series are meaningfully bound by the ironic transformative aspect serving as the 'leap or an abstraction'⁷¹⁷ in the novel. Randomness and arbitrariness are not something that Mistry specifically brings to this novel, but they are parts of what Lukács called the compositional structure of the realist novel. Agreed; there is however something else to this reading: first, randomness is *also* structural in nature, used by the postcolonial state to discipline the postcolonial public; and second, Mistry provides a balancing aspect as well through a minor-oriented humorous-sympathetic form of narration.

The structural violence inflicted by the postcolonial state, an example of which being the destruction of slums for the beautification of the city, not only testifies to the enormous and sudden nature of power of the postcolonial state, but also reveals the precarity of the urban poor. For politicians, the urban poor are merely vote-banks and can be dispensed with at will. But the urge to live and fight for survival by the urban poor is as strong as is the fact that the population of the urban poor is integral to the political metropolitan societies – recall that Rushdie in *Midnight's Children* writes that the slum is reportedly seen to supernaturally exist here and there after its demolition,⁷¹⁸ or that Nabarun Bhattacharya deploys a narrative of irreal guerrilla warfare to allegorise the hawkers' agitations against the state. Mistry here underscores both state violence and minor resistance through Ishvar and Om's encounter with family planning and their tremendous desire to live and resume the practices of the dismantled community. Their family was burnt alive by the upper-caste people because Narayan, Om's father, equipped with efficient tailoring skills and political consciousness, stood against the caste-based violence of the local landlord Thakur.

⁷¹⁶ Eli Park Sorensen, 'Excess and Design in Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance*', *Novel: A Forum for Fiction*, 41.2-3 (2008), 342-362 (p. 350).

⁷¹⁷ Ibid, p. 358.

⁷¹⁸ Rushdie, *Children*, p. 569.

Ishvar and Om were saved because they were in town working as tailors. Thakur, later a Congress Party leader, recalls them in the village and arranges for their forcible sterilisation, for while he cannot kill them in broad daylight, he has the legal framework to disable and maim them. A stranger tells Ishvar and Om that he has been sterilised twice, showing that there is no count, only target-fulfilment.⁷¹⁹ After they were made disabled, with Om's testicles forced out and Ishvar's leg left to rot from a careless sterilisation operation, Ishvar cries out, 'what has this country come to? Treating man as animals. People can't visit their natives?'⁷²⁰ This blurring of the distinction between man and animal is, according to Giorgio Agamben, 'a dominant paradigm of government in contemporary politics'.⁷²¹ The modern state, which inherits from the colonial state of violence, suspends rule for exception and turns exception into *the* rule, reducing human life into 'homo sacer' or bare life that can be killed without impunity.⁷²² Stephen Morton uses Agamben's theory of 'state of exception' to posit that 'contemporary states of emergency owe much to colonial forms of sovereignty' which were in turn based on the discourse of 'lawful violence' in European colonies.⁷²³ His studies in colonial law and governmentality in India, Kenya, South Africa, and Palestine shows how practices of state violence on citizen subjects operated as part of the discourse of colonial governmentality, the preservation of law, and the liquidation of anti-colonial struggles. The declaration of state of emergency is thus both a harking back to the history and culture of state-sponsored law-preserving colonial violence, and a dominant form of modern politics in which the government can lawfully blur the distinction between the human and the nonhuman, and can turn characters in the novel such as Om and Ishvar into disabled bodies or kill the already expendable ones such as Shankar the beggar without impunity. The force that appears random and incomprehensible to these everyday characters is in fact a structural form of violence that is historical in nature and integral to the ethics and practices of the postcolonial state.

Mistry's narration does the 'fine balancing' act here which I will argue constitutes his minor realist aesthetic of the emergency. It is clear that the minor

⁷¹⁹ Mistry, *Balance*, p. 535.

⁷²⁰ Ibid, p. 546.

⁷²¹ Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. by Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000), p. 2.

⁷²² Ibid, p. 18.

⁷²³ Stephen Morton, *States of Emergency*, p. 3.

characters are powerless. But Mistry does not narrate the incidents with drama and sentiment, as Bhabani Bhattacharya does in *Hungers!*, or as Hardy does through a tragic-fatalistic style of narration in *The Return of the Native* (whose depiction of Egdon Heath as a powerful and controlling force is close to that of the emergency).⁷²⁴ His narration is rather light-hearted and humorous. By light-hearted I do not mean unengaging or superficial, nor do I suggest by humorous the quality of being judgmental, condescending, and partisan. Rather, these qualities stand for the narrator's deep sense of sympathy and solidarity with the characters. Tragic events continue to happen in the lives of the weak and the vulnerable, but what characterises India's vast minor population is their capacity to endure obstacles and continue to live through togetherness, humour, and solidarity. Mistry's narrator is both participative (sympathetic) and observant (affective-expressive) in these occasions. The episode of the PM's rally can serve the point. The rally is described sometimes from the consciousness of Ishvar, Om, and Rajaram, and sometimes from that of the narrator. The big wooden figure of Indira Gandhi at the rally is described thus: 'The cardboard-and-plywood figure stood with arms outstretched, waiting as though to embrace the audience. An outline map of the country hung suspended behind the head, a battered halo'.⁷²⁵ This line could have been the thought of the narrator's, Om's or Rajaram's. It could have been Om's because right before this description Om exclaims: 'Look at that [the figure] yaar!' But it could equally have been Rajaram's, for when the figure falls due to the downwash of the rose-petal-showering helicopter, Rajaram says, 'nobody wants to be caught in the Prime Minister's embrace'. Mistry here suggests a plural narratorial consciousness that is critical and sarcastic. The cut-out figure is created to indicate the image of Mother India (note the map outline behind the figure, and also the repeated references to Indira Gandhi as Mother India in the speech of the dignitaries). However, contrary to the conventional image of Mother India, where a Goddess is holding an Indian flag in one hand and blessing the viewer with the other in front of a life-size outline of India, Gandhi's figure here is ridiculously larger while the outline of India merely appears as a 'battered halo'. The sarcasm is clear that Indira is a more powerful figure than India as a nation. There is a Rabelaisian sense of grotesque here, in which the monstrous body of a woman is treading the ground and

⁷²⁴ See Thomas Hardy, *The Return of the Native* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1978 [orig. pub: 1878]).

⁷²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 262.

battering it, killing everyone in her embrace. Rajaram's mockery that everyone is escaping her embrace despite the exuberant exhibition of love and affection has to be read in this context. His sarcasm is again on display when he tells the tailors that the packed rally is the 'government's tamasha'.⁷²⁶ Tamasha, or theatrics in Hindi, is an old form of theatrical performance in India combining miming, body painting, dance, innovative use of on-stage light, and of magic to tell a heartrending story and capture the attention of the audience. The melodramatic aspect is integral to Indian culture and society. Here, Tamasha is highlighted through a number of theatrics during the rally: the sudden flashing of coloured lights on stage, the showering of rose petals from the helicopter, Gandhi's son Sanjay Gandhi distributing leaflets from a gas balloon, and so on. Mistry shows here how politicians use theatrics to capture the attention of a large audience ranging anywhere between ten thousand and five hundred thousand (here twenty-five thousand) people, who cannot see the ministers clearly and are busy in themselves. Nonetheless, this tamasha tactic backfires, for as the dignitaries begin their hackneyed political speeches, 'Rajaram took out a coin and began playing Heads or Tails with Om. Around them, people were making new friends, chatting, discussing the monsoon. Children invented games and drew pictures in the dust'.⁷²⁷ Later, when the Prime Minister herself takes the stage and starts talking about the 'disruptive forces' against the government, saying that the government 'will continue to fight back until there is no more danger to democracy',⁷²⁸ Ishvar and Om along with others start playing a game of cards. These actions suggest that these speeches do not make any sense, and that people have begun to see through the hypocrisy of the politicians, who speak about eliminating poverty but arrive at the rally by helicopter, about discipline in work but force people to stop working and starve for the day to attend a rally. The notion of collectivised Nehruvian nation-building is mocked in such apparent tiredness and indifference to these speeches. The hilarity is further heightened when Gandhi's speech about eliminating poverty is juxtaposed with Rajaram's response to Om's smart card playing: "'Is that all?' [...] 'So much noise for that? Only a small obstacle! Beat this if you have the strength!'"⁷²⁹ The sense of anti-climax in Rajaram's response may as well be transposed onto the 'serious' act of poverty elimination,

⁷²⁶ Mistry, *Balance*, p. 259.

⁷²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 263.

⁷²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 265.

⁷²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 265.

relegating it to nonsense noise-making. On the other hand, card playing is a pun here, suggesting that Gandhi herself is playing the cards, in the superstitious sense that she consults her astrologer who picks the day of the rally despite its intense heat (this is pointed out by a volunteer; Rushdie also speaks about her superstition in *Midnight's Children*).⁷³⁰ Humour and irony here give weight to the sarcastic and suggestive nature of the narration. Sarcasm through simple humour is used consummately in the theatrics of showering rose petals through the helicopter: 'The crowd cheered, but the pilot had mistimed it. Instead of showering the Prime Minister and dignitaries, the petals fell in a pasture behind the stage. A goatherd who was grazing the animals thanked the heavens for the honour, and hurried home to tell his family about the miracle'.⁷³¹ This is of course neither Rajaram's nor the two tailors' sarcastic consciousness; it is the omniscient narrator who uses a simple form of humour to suggest the futility of these acts and the politics of exhibitionism/theatrics, both of which have come to define Gandhi and her emergency regime.

These acts are futile because there really is no clear plan for eradicating poverty or developing the economy, only policies, programmes, speeches, and gimmicks. Indeed, the baselessness of Gandhi's speech of helping the poor is cogently hinted at the end of the rally episode when the slum dwellers are refused their promised money for attendance and dropped off the bus midway through the roads. The minor population are mere numbers for votes, expendable figures; they receive no respect, are not considered humans, and can be disposed of at any time. Mistry's narration shifts from sarcasm and humour to sympathy and fellow-feeling. As they come back to the slum, they hear a strange noise from the house of their friend, Monkey-man. Earlier, Monkey-man had requested the police officer to allow him to take his monkeys to the rally, because unlike his dog they could not stay alone.⁷³² His wish was not granted because it was claimed that the event was not a circus, which is entirely ironic because the rally was indeed a circus show in itself filled with theatrics, gimmick, light, drama, athleticism, etc. But this is a circus by and for humans, not for nonhuman animals. The Monkey-man then discovers that his dog has killed and eaten parts of the monkeys out of hunger. He tries to throttle the dog but is taken away by

⁷³⁰ Ibid, p. 262.

⁷³¹ Mistry, *Balance*, p. 264.

⁷³² Ibid, p. 260.

the tailors and Rajaram. Mistry's narrator pinpoints a tremendous sense of affection and love between humans and animals as well as between slum dwellers. They do not mock the Monkey-man because they understand his deep love and emotion for these animals, and instead stay close to him 'past midnight, letting him grieve for as long as he liked'.⁷³³ Despite knowing that Dina will be angry for their absence and that they should prepare to leave early tomorrow, both tailors choose to help him mourn the loss and convince him to forgive the dog's deeds out of hunger. What are seen as expendable bodies in the slum for the state become a community where people take care of each other to provide relief and warmth, even as they also have to struggle every day for survival and compete with each other in jobs. The tailors say that the incident is no one's fault, but of course it is the fault of the emergency, of its agents who not only seizes the livelihood of a poor man but also his family. Here the narration aims subdued irony and sarcasm at the state and the emergency, but conveys a sense of sympathy and fellow-feeling for the minor characters of the novel.

I have been using the term minor in a socio-economic sense, as well as in a way these characters would otherwise be considered peripheral and minor in a bourgeois critical realist novel (recall the beggar in Sahgal's novel). I have argued that Mistry adopts a minor aesthetic of plurality to shape his emergency realism. Yet, I think a crucial observation needs to be made on the use of the term here. Minor characters, as Alex Woloch tells us, have always been an integral part of realist writing. They are used in the two categories of *worker* and *eccentric* to play the instrumental, utilitarian role of supporting the mainframe of the narrative – following the protagonist and then disappearing quickly.⁷³⁴ In a time of huge socio-economic transformation in Europe for capitalist industrialism, they appeared as '*the proletarians of the novel*'; and the realist novel – with its intense class consciousness and attention towards social inequality – makes much use of such formal processes'.⁷³⁵ In the twentieth century, the two World Wars, the Great Depression, decolonisation, the rise of Communist politics, social movements based on gender, race, class etc., increasingly changed the publishing conditions and social position of writers, and consequently the notion of heroes and protagonists in the European novel. This not

⁷³³ Ibid, p. 269.

⁷³⁴ Alex Woloch, *The One vs The Many: Minor Characters and the Space of the Protagonist in the Novel* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), pp. 23-27.

⁷³⁵ Ibid, p. 27; emphasis in original.

only brought into focus the lives of minor characters in autobiographical or fictional frameworks, but in the process also constitutively reshaped the modes of realism. Socialist realism, for instance, which encourages writing by proletarians about proletarians, is clearly a politically shaped mode within the register of realism. In Indian realist writing, minor characters, which mostly belong to the lower castes and classes, received focal attention during the late-colonial caste-based movements and the literary movement of the Progressive Writers' Association. But the characters were still either seen in a class-based sentimental framework or rationalised in a lens shaped by the values of modernisation (one can think here of the writings of Saratchandra Chattopadhyay and Mulk Raj Anand). Literature that writes the lives of minor characters began to take shape, properly speaking, with the Dalit writings. According to Toral Gajarawala, Dalit realist writing borrows from the political emergency and proletarian ethic of Russian socialist realism (which, perhaps, is not surprising): the idea of breaking the social and economic shackles and emerging as a free social entity. But unlike the concept of a hero within socialist realism, the Dalit writers situated a collectivised politics or a revolutionary consciousness in their writing. The Dalits in these novels are not as minor: 'in a genre whose stated aim is the evocation of the human conditions of Dalit materiality and the prescription for its transgression, the character who provides the key can never be considered minor'.⁷³⁶ The Dalit character in Gajarawala's reading appears as a *composite protagonist* who is not a modernist fragmented self, but a plural body constructed through several narrative selves, what Gajarawala terms the 'realist particularism' of the Dalit novel.⁷³⁷ I think Mistry also does this here – making a tapestry of a collectivised composite plural being of minor characters. But there is a crucial difference here as well. Mistry is from a socio-economically privileged background. He settled in Canada in the early 1980s. He decided to write about minority characters because his research found hardly any noted fictional representation of the class- and caste-based tortures and trauma that the minority communities had to go through during the emergency.⁷³⁸ Also, he writes in English – a language that is a token of global cultural power.⁷³⁹ He is not unaware of

⁷³⁶ Toral Jatin Gajarawala, *Untouchable Fictions*, p. 92.

⁷³⁷ *Ibid*, pp. 92-93.

⁷³⁸ Nandini Bhautoo-Dewnarain, *Rohinton Mistry*, p. 30.

⁷³⁹ In such a framework, his writing appears close to the category of 'minor literature' of Franz Kafka's as the French philosophers, Giles Deleuze and Felix Guattari would have it. In *Kafka: Towards a Minor Literature* (trans. by Dana Polan [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986]), they wrote: 'A minor literature doesn't come from a minor language; it is rather that which a minority constructs within

his socio-cultural privileges, nor does he attempt to write an authentic portrayal of caste atrocity and class violence. From this awareness of difference, he creates a narrative matrix where the narrator is an outsider but deeply sympathetic. The strategic use of sarcasm and humour, and the adoption of multiple minor consciousness, allow him to give an aesthetics of minority in the novel. I will add to this discussion two other features of the narration – detailed character-building and coeval use of time – and conclude the section.

Mistry's narrator takes time to develop the background of the characters. The novel begins historically, on the day the actual emergency was declared, as Ishvar, Om, and Maneck also arrive at Dina's house. This is followed by Dina's life story. The past then comes back to the present in the tailors' search for a rented house, where Om appears to be always impatient and angry. Soon we are told how Om's parents and his whole family were burnt alive, and we begin to understand the depth of anger behind the impatience. After this, Maneck's story is introduced. Each of these characters is constructed as historical and important. They may be social-economically minor but they all have important life stories to tell. Against the dynamism of these characters, the so-called important figures of political heads and upper-class, upper-caste people appear as flat types, even as buffoons at times (as we saw in the episode of the PM's rally). Through these acts, Mistry makes it clear from the beginning of the narrative that he is writing a novel and these characters are his heroes. We need to know who they are and why they are here together. What is suggested in this kind of narration is that the linearity of time is composed of many linear historical events: If what the novel wants to show us is the intercepted and interlinked lives of multiple characters, this interlinking must be historical in nature, since each character exists in an instance that is an accumulation of all the moments in the past. The narration hence follows a concept of time where linearity and horizontality of time are bound together. There are only sixteen chapters in this six-hundred-and-fourteen-page novel, because every chapter is composed of four to five episodes that tell us what the characters are

a major language (p. 16). Kafka was born in Prague in the Austro-Hungarian Empire in a Jewish minority family who spoke Yiddish. He was educated in German and used that language for writing allegorically about racial, social and legal issues. Deleuze and Guattari think that Kafka's literary techniques, often a subtle mixing of realism with fantasy, derive from his 'deterritorialisation', his ethnic and socio-political minoritisation, recalling Mistry's socio-political and historical belonging. But unlike Kafka, neither does Mistry use a language of social mobility (English being a minority language in reading fiction, at least in the late nineties when the novel was published); nor does he write like Kafka, altering radically the codes of realism through innovative prose and formal use.

doing at a particular time. Sometimes, an episode tells us what Om and Ishvar are doing in their slum (e.g. in Chapter III, entitled ‘Small Obstacles’, they are shown to be making new friends with Rajaram and Monkey-man in their new slum-neighbourhood in which the narration includes brief background descriptions of these friends, etc.⁷⁴⁰ Sometimes, it talks about Dina, her problems regarding the house rent, and the recent pressure of eviction from Ibrahim and others (as in Chapter XI, ‘The Bright Future Clouded’⁷⁴¹). These characters are never just given a brief note; they are actually important for the content of the narrative, helping Mistry to compose the novel’s vision of a pluralistic social fabric.⁷⁴² For sure, the events progress in time, but time in a plural society is also pluralistic. Here, one tragic event in one’s life bodes tragedy for all, as their lives are economically and socially connected; nonetheless, they still fight together in their different ways to recover a happy time. This dimension of time can only be seen from a future perspective when the current time has become past, and when the longer framework makes life a pattern of sadness and happiness rather than a one-sided representation. The plural notions of time are etched onto the linear narrative, like how the different social times are etched onto the quilt. Here, once again, the quilt episode becomes important for our discussion. In the first quote about the quilt patches, the characters were trying to find out the experiences that these patches remind them of. Like those experiences, the patches are leftovers as well. But the vast minor population in India does not throw away leftovers. They keep them, for they may be of use in the future. Similarly, the philosophy of time is one of keeping the past with the present. This is most clearly understood in the old cultural act of drawing events (patterns) on a shawl or on a quilt. Through the act of drawing, people acknowledge how the past makes the present vibrant through the co-existence of sad and happy elements – which is exactly what Ishvar, the villager, says in the quilt quote. The point is not to concentrate on one patch or element but on the whole quilt. Together the quilt is the dynamic being of time. But Ishvar also qualifies later in the episode that ‘time has no length and breadth. The question is what happened during its passing. And what happened is, our lives have been joined together’.⁷⁴³ The sentence proves to be ironic later, because after this episode the tailors go through the

⁷⁴⁰ Mistry, *Balance*, pp. 167-86.

⁷⁴¹ *Ibid*, pp. 428-33.

⁷⁴² For instance, through Shankar they come to know the Beggarmaster, who will go on to rescue them from the rehabilitation camp and later from the landlord’s goons.

⁷⁴³ Mistry, *Balance*, p. 491.

horrors of sterilisation, even though this will not kill them or separate them from one another for life. The novel does not end with absolute tragedy either. We are shown that despite all these problems, despite the immense level of torture and pain conditioned by Gandhi's emergency, these characters have continued to live and add more patches to the quilt, which makes a final appearance at the end. Here, a few threads have come off the quilt, symbolic of the disabled condition of the characters' bodies and profession, but Ishvar the beggar says he can fix the quilt, meaning that they are not psychologically defeated. Mistry shows us that there is still equal excitement for their old profession and equal affection for each other. Maneck, who deserted this community, dies of guilt, but those who withstood the horrors have continued to be together and make a community which is disabled but not dysfunctional. In this way, Mistry's narrative act of giving voice to a plural minor population becomes empowering for his readers.

Thus, I disagree with Nilufer Bharucha, who thinks that Mistry has failed in depicting caste violence authentically because of his geographical distance from the local realities of India and has turned the characters of Om and Ishvar into 'cardboard boxes'.⁷⁴⁴ Mistry has not tried to write an authentic narrative of caste violence here. Rather, he dares to give voice to the characters whom Emma Tarlo considered the subalterns and found not resistant and combative enough. He takes time to build the community of minor population and to make them feel important. We saw these characters in Rushdie and in Sahgal, but never found them as serious, active, dynamic beings and agents as they are here. Mistry creates a narrative technique that draws from the minor lives of these characters and never hides the semblance of a participant-narrator. Yet, this is not an anthropological participant-narrator, but one who has deep sympathy for these people, a deep knowledge of the lives of India's minor population, and above all, a balancing sense of judgement between tragic events and the hope to live and love the other. For this reason, I believe that reading this novel as postcolonial realism only offers us a limited understanding. Eli Park Sorensen's Lukácsian reading is astute, as is that of Laura Moss' who finds that the North American readers'

⁷⁴⁴ Nilufer E. Bharucha, *Rohinton Mistry: Ethnic Enclosures and Transcultural Spaces* (Jaipur: Rawat Publications, 2003), pp. 166-67.

uncomplicated equating of this novel with nineteenth-century realism is wrong.⁷⁴⁵ She rightly ‘rescues’ the novel from such ‘neo-imperialist’ misreadings. But then she sends it into another brand of essentialism by saying that Mistry should be read in the Indian realist tradition. As I have been arguing throughout the thesis, in the same way that there is no pattern of nineteenth-century realism, the Indian realist tradition is too wide, diverse, and layered to be considered a coherent pattern. Mistry’s realism can be compared to a whole body of writers with diverse class, caste, gender, and religious affiliations. There is also hardly a pattern of postcolonial realism. It may be true that postcolonial writers are born with the same sense of historical crisis where forces of colonialism are the operative tools, and that they can feel the same paradox between the disillusionment of the present and the anticipation for a better future. As a result of this, there may be certain realist styles and modes that are favoured by multiple regions for the purpose of talking back to the colonial empire. But these styles and modes are fundamentally shaped by the specific historical conjuncture which their writings address as well as by the side of ideological spectrum (shaped by values of class/caste/race/gender, etc.) that the writers are on. Peter Morey grasps this fully when reading ‘the eruption of the symbolic, the satirical, the allegorical and the carnivalesque’ in the novel, he writes: ‘Mistry is here developing a more stylised and syncretic way of representing the world than the conventional critical view, which sees him simply as a realist writer, would allow’.⁷⁴⁶ However, he does not historicise Mistry’s realism in his syncretic reading. A writer writing to a specific conjuncture manufactured by a long historical crisis and an immediate catastrophic event will adopt a mode that is specific to the orientation and nature of the event. Not only are the realist modes between Devi and Mistry or between Mistry and Sahgal different, in fact, a careful study can show that even the realist modes in Mistry’s *Such a Long Journey* (based on the two Indian wars with China and with West Pakistan) and *Family Matters* (based loosely on the Babri masjid demolition and the rise of Hindu fundamentalism) are differing, if not entirely different.⁷⁴⁷ Until we tease out the specific historical conjunctures and how they shape the choice of mode, a drive to find

⁷⁴⁵ Laura Moss, ‘Can Rohinton Mistry’s Realism Rescue the Novel?’, in *Postcolonising the Commonwealth: Studies in Literature and Culture*, ed. by Rowland Smith (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2000), pp. 157-65.

⁷⁴⁶ Peter Morey, *Rohinton Mistry* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), p. 98.

⁷⁴⁷ Mistry, *Such a Long Journey* (London: Faber & Faber, 1991); *Family Matters* (London: Faber & Faber, 2003).

a pattern in writers may seem unfounded. The symbol of the quilt, to return to the episode one final time, is where Mistry stresses that the question is not one of authenticity in representation, but of foresight and acute study of the hierarchical, composite nature of Indian society. His style of narration reminds one of the British Marxist historians of the 1960s, such as E. P. Thomson, George Rudé, Eric Hobsbawm, and others, who in a strongly political task attempted to retrieve the histories of the oppressed, the weak, the disenfranchised, the working classes, and the people through reading their diaries, memoirs, accounts, etc. Their project is widely known as the ‘history from below’.⁷⁴⁸ In Mistry’s historical and sympathetic engagement with the minority scenario of the emergency, and in his task of supplying voice to the unsaid and the unuttered, he appears to write a minor account of realism, or a realism from below.

In this chapter, I noted how the emergency was diversely represented in fiction. The authors took the language of bodily oppression, class, and caste to understand the horrors of the event, giving their narrative form a realist strain. But they also mobilised a number of modes to adequately represent the emergency conditions. These modes are not always analytical. I argued that Rushdie’s use of magic is descriptive, while the two other modes of grotesque and mythic – which together constitute the framework of extra-realism – critique the emergency and situate a reading of solidarity and resistance from below. I also argued that the relative distance from the event by these writers might also have occasioned the choice of different modes. In Sahgal’s and in Mistry’s use of emergency realism, which we read as critical realist, we found a cogent critique of the emergency conditions and a horizon of transformative possibilities. Sahgal uses the realist devices of irony and satire to represent the dark sides of the emergency measures. She also mobilises a gender-based critique through the uses of memoir and memory, through which she shifts the focus from a bleak realisation of the present to a long history of cross-cultural exchanges and practices of cosmopolitanism in India. We also argued that such a perspective is thoroughly upper class-based, making Sahgal’s realism into a realism from above. Mistry’s realist critique of the emergency reverses the angle of perspective. He uses socio-

748 See E. P. Thompson, Thompson, E. P., ‘History from Below’, in *The Essential E. P. Thompson*, ed. by Dorothy Thompson (New York: New Press, 2001), pp. 481-489; see also, *History from Below: Studies in Popular Protest and Popular Ideology in Honour of George Rudé*, ed. by Frederick Krantz (Montreal: Concordia university Press, 1985).

economically minor characters who do not always understand what the emergency is but whose lives are largely determined by its effects. His critique is forwarded through the sarcastic and plural subaltern consciousness, as well as through a narrator who is deeply sympathetic to the characters. The transformative possibility in *Mistry* appears in the end, when we realise that despite having superhuman powers, despite disabling these characters' bodies and professions, the emergency has not been able to destroy the community of these characters, their sense of comradeship, and their love for each other. The desire to live socially in a community, enduring all obstacles, is eternal in humans.

Conclusion

In the end, let me quickly note some of the points raised in the thesis. I have argued that the concept of modernity, in the Indian context, is deeply linked with the processes of world-wide colonial- and capitalist modernisation. Since colonialism and imperialism are global by nature, modernity too assumes a global character. At the same time, modernity is also shaped crucially by the specificities of historical conjuncture. I have contended that in order to understand this coeval character of (post)colonial modernity, an approach is needed that studies the global, uneven, and long nature of historical crisis in postcolonial India. I have chosen three catastrophic events from the late-colonial and postcolonial periods – the 1943-44 Bengal famine, the Naxalbari Movement (1967-1972), and the state of emergency (1975-1977). Taking from Veena Das and Louis Althusser, I have shown how these catastrophic events form a dialectic with the long historical crisis of modernity in India. I have also argued that these three events, despite all being conditioned by agrarian and industrial crises in colonial and postcolonial India, are different from one another in nature, form, and orientation and give rise to different kinds of victim communities and politics.

My main contention in the thesis has been that novels that register these events are able to capture the dialectic between events and crisis in their use of form and mode. While form is the shape-giving factor, mode is what gives form its particularity. Modes are chosen by socially committed writers to analyse and uncover the historical forces operating behind catastrophic events, to address the specificities of their nature and orientation, and to convey the specific geographical impact and the local cultural reception of the events. The events generated from colonialism and imperialism may all be global-historical in nature, but they do not produce the same kinds of impact or artistic expression everywhere. Modes respond to these historical specificities by their analytical components and by their local, aesthetic, linguistic and cultural mediations. Because modes are also reflections of the processes of artistic production – often in the question of which mode is adequate and why – they can further capture the processes of mediation as well. Moreover, in a catastrophe-based work, there is often a juxtaposition of different modes, and sometimes this juxtaposition may feature two apparently contrasting modes (for example, the fantastic and the social realist). They

are mobilised to capture the puzzle and the horror brought by an event, and to analyse the catastrophic situation. They may be also used because socially committed writers tend to deploy a utopian transformative future in their content as a means to redeem the bleak present. In short, modes are historically determined, locally shaped, self-reflexive, and essentially heterogeneous. Because of this heterogeneity, the novels that attempt to represent the critical historical conjunctures of a catastrophe realistically are essentially heterogeneous, experimental, and modernistic in form. I have called this literary framework of postcolonial modernity ‘crisis realism’.

In my three chapters, I have then gone on to test out my propositions regarding crisis realism. In the second chapter, I have taken up the case of the 1943 Bengal famine. I have argued that the disaster was produced by a long crisis in agriculture and industry, and also by the immediate contexts of the Second World War, failure of the Indian oceanic monsoon, the operation of speculative capital, and anti-colonial agitations. I have showed how Bhabani Bhattacharya uses an analytical mode comprising both an expert analysis of the famine and an ethnographic documentation of the disaster. He also captures the specificity of the crisis through the use of an affective mode, fusing elements of melodrama and sensation and making use of local linguistic and cultural expressions. This combined analytical-affective mode is different from Kamala Markandaya’s memoir-driven, social realist mode of scarcity and hunger. Amalendu Chakraborty’s metafictional mode, I have argued, is uniquely sensitive to the socio-historical processes through which the famine became transformed into chronic malnutrition. This mode is different from both Markandaya’s and Bhattacharya’s, but bears many similarities with Bhattacharya’s for the common context of the Bengal famine and for the immensely experimental use of realism.

In the third chapter, I have read four novels by Mahasweta Devi and Nabarun Bhattacharya respectively, in order to understand how they have represented peasant experience and the social conditions of the urban poor in the contexts of insurgency and state reprisal. I have also showed that international events such as Mao Zedong’s ‘cultural revolution’ had a major impact in Bengal. Because of the violent nature of the movement and the predominantly conservative discourses of urban society and urban media, the Naxal insurgency was portrayed primarily as a product of terroristic or ‘romantic’ inclinations of the urban youth. I have argued how Mahasweta Devi points out this propagandist misreading of the situation in two of her novels through

the use of a quest mode, in which her protagonists set out to find out about the murder of their son or the disappearance of a friend. This mode is built through a one-day narrative that uses an expansive temporality and that historicises the event with the help of narrative features such as the dialectic between linear plot and non-linear action time, the connection between dreams and memory, an exceptionally interventionist narrator, and the trope of the reappearance of the ‘dead’ Naxalite/tribal insurgent character. Nabarun Bhattacharya’s novels render the transformation of the *lumpenproletariat* of the Naxalite period into a fraction of the urban poor, the work-force for the consumerist bourgeoisie in the postcolonial metropolis. Bhattacharya mobilises an urban fantastic mode through which he situates the historical link between the Naxalite guerrilla insurgency and the *irreal* guerrilla warfare by Calcutta’s urban poor. The arrangement and counter-utilisation of the urban space are instrumental in Bhattacharya’s use of fantasy, which takes up a class-based character and a utopian spirit.

In the fourth and final chapter, I have shown how novelists have registered the state of emergency under Indira Gandhi’s government. I have argued that writers have mainly used extra-realist and critical realist modes to represent the violence, torture, and horror of the emergency. The extra-realist framework is composed respectively of magical, grotesque, and mythical modes in the works of Salman Rushdie, O V Vijayan, and Arun Joshi, and is named thus because of its exploitation of the realist discourses of class struggle and bodily oppression. But this framework is different from the critical irrealist framework of Mahasweta Devi and Nabarun Bhattacharya in its lack of historical, critical, and analytical components. The critical realist mode is analytical and forceful, but the element of critique is qualified by the writers’ class- and caste-based perspectives. Nayantara Sahgal uses a deeply analytical narrative accompanied by the historically specific use of time and cosmopolitanism – a perspective which is predominantly upper class and liberal. Rohinton Mistry uses a minority perspective to understand the impact the emergency has on the poor, the lower castes, and the socio-religious minorities, who together, paradoxically enough, represent the bulk of the population of India. This minority perspective however is mobilised by a socio-economically privileged writer and not a lower-caste or Dalit writer. Thus, I have called Mistry’s use of realism a realism from below, and Sahgal’s, correspondingly, a realism from above.

I would like, finally, to make two brief observations on the continuity of crisis in India and on postcolonial realism. Like its temporally-marked beginning, Mistry's *A Fine Balance* also ends in a historically specific time period, i.e. in 1984 as Maneck returns from Dubai to attend his father's funeral. On his way home, he is told by a Sikh taxi driver that since the assassination of Indira Gandhi, there has been routine violence against the Sikhs and others: 'for ordinary people, nothing has changed. Government still keeps breaking poor people's homes and jhopadpattis. In villages they still dig wells only if so many sterilizations are done. They tell farmers they will get fertilizers only after nusbandhi is performed. Living each day is to face one emergency or another'.⁷⁴⁹ Gandhi was killed by her Sikh bodyguards following her Operation Blue Star campaign, during which the Indian army was deployed to remove separatist Sikh militants from the holy site of the Golden Temple in Amritsar. The decades of 1980s and early 1990s were marked by violent religion- or ethnicity-based separatist movements in various regions of India. These movements were led by people whose fate did not change much in the aftermath of decolonisation in India, and who have continued to suffer economic neglect and from socio-religious marginalisation in the increasingly 'Hindu' India. Although these movements were brutally suppressed by the Indian armed forces, the political tensions in these regions continue to exist today, and a permanent emergency marks the lives of the people implicated.

1984 was also the year when one of the worst industrial disasters in history occurred in Bhopal due to the systematic degradation of the safety of workers in the factory owned by the U.S.-based multi-national chemical company Union Carbide. Around four thousand people were killed and another half a million were injured. The toxic gas leakage more than thirty years ago continues to affect life in the region. The door to neo-colonialism that Gandhi's emergency had opened only widened with time, and this widening pushed the government to liberalise the economy in 1991. In the two decades since then, liberalisation and globalisation in India have been marked by a conspicuous rise of consumerism and a new urban middle class, an unprecedented disparity in wealth and poverty, a systematic dismantling of small scale industries, gross abuse of the environment, rise in aggressive nationalism, and by increasing cases of caste and sexual violence. In rural India, they have been marked specifically by an

⁷⁴⁹ Mistry, *Balance*, p. 581.

entrenchment in class and caste and the tragic phenomenon of farmers' suicides. Although Amalendu Chakraborty's novel, *Ākāler Sandhāne*, shows that famine has transformed into chronic malnutrition and starvation in the 1980s postcolonial Bengal, the journalist P. Sainath tells us in his survey of India's rural societies in *Everybody Loves a Good Drought* (2000) that famine, starvation, social oppression, and farmer suicide have continued to ravage the Indian rural sectors.⁷⁵⁰ As India shifts to a 'service sector' based economy, crisis in agriculture, environment, and society will only intensify. At this critical conjuncture, it is imperative for us to choose another set of events and another set of literary works from the immediate past and to attempt to uncover the wide nature of socio-historical crisis surrounding the country's postcolonial present. For this, we will have to tackle the question of conjuncture (i.e. multiple contexts and their determinants).

This brings me to the second observation on postcolonial realism. After long being neglected by scholars in postcolonial studies, realism has finally begun to be taken into consideration as an object of critical enquiry. A number of recent monographs have addressed the nuanced and complex uses of literary realism in novels about postcolonial India, Somalia, Indonesia, or other contexts.⁷⁵¹ There have also been attempts to develop a framework for postcolonial realism by mobilising the paradigm of world-systems theory and by exploring the systemic nature of crisis in literary works by writers from the (semi- or global) peripheries.⁷⁵² In *Realism, Form and the Postcolonial Novel*, Nicholas Robinette writes,

[D]ictatorship, apartheid, and diaspora do not provide the same conditions of knowing as does citizenship in a liberal democracy. The freedom to observe social life, to collect data, to move through the various zones of economic, political, and cultural force – nothing guarantees these as a human right. Such power has frequently enough been stripped from the public and allocated to the state. Where then can the writer conduct their work of observation and mapping? Whether we speak of Suss laws or apartheid, the disappeared or the

⁷⁵⁰ P Sainath, *Everybody Loves a Good Drought: Stories from India's Poorest Districts* (New Delhi: Penguin, 2000).

⁷⁵¹ See Peter Hitchcock, *The Long Space: Transnationalism and Postcolonial Form* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010), pp. 1-44; Eli Park Sorensen, *Postcolonial Studies and the Literary: Theory, Interpretation and the Novel* (London: Palgrave, 2010); Ulka Anjaria, *Realism*; Hamish Dalley, *The Postcolonial Historical Novel: Realism, Allegory, and the Representation of Contested Pasts* (London: Palgrave, 2014); see also the recent issues on global and world realism in the journals *Novel* and *Modern Language Quarterly*, which I have cited in Chapter One.

⁷⁵² Nicholas Robinette, *Realism, Form and the Postcolonial Novel* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Pivot, 2014); Warwick Research Collective, *Uneven and Combined Development: Towards a New Theory of World-Literature* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2015).

diasporic, politics and social practice frequently undermine the basic conditions of realist writing.⁷⁵³

I agree with these observations. It is important to understand the historical conditions of, say, (post)colonialism in India, and how these conditions shape the specific forms of production and articulation of knowledge. It is also important to build a framework of postcolonial realism under which a number of writers from diverse geographies, who have responded to the historical conditions of colonialism, are studied, in order to understand the global nature and impact of (post)colonial conditions. At the same time, it is vital to address the various sub-conditions that the historical condition of postcolonialism has given birth to India, and to mark the social, geographical, and political heterogeneities between writers who represent these conditions. These heterogeneities are shaped by the uniquely specific conjunctures from which they write, or, in the Sartrean sense, by their 'situations'. It is crucial to ask: What kinds of realism do their works offer, and why are they different from each other? Then, there are questions of whether there are further developments in a realist form that registers a specific historical condition within postcolonialism, say the Naxalite insurgency in the contemporary works of Jhumpa Lahiri and Neel Mukherjee. Why does Lahiri use a diasporic mode for the imaginative reconstruction of the period? Why is Neel Mukherjee interested in using the mode of diary writing by a young Naxalite? What ideological and social values are implicated in their narratives? And how do they respond to or differ from the quest mode in Devi's Naxalite novels? There may also be another set of specificities concerning the different modes used by the same writer to respond to the same historical condition (for instance, tribal life and issues in postcolonial India as seen from the perspectives of a middle class, upper caste, male or female character and from a tribal himself or herself in Devi's fiction, say in *Operation? - Bashai Tudu* and in *Chotti Munda and His Arrow*, respectively). What all these sets and subsets of questions suggest is that if we undertake to construct an analytical category – Robinette's 'systematic' reading for instance – that is able to capture the geo-historical shaping of postcolonial realism, then we will have to carefully address the relevant social, geographical, historical, and political contingencies and determinants. One way to approach this task, as I have attempted to

⁷⁵³ Robinette, *Realism*, p. 6.

do in this thesis, is to interrogate how the general is both implicated within the specific and influenced by it. This, I think, is where a study of the historically and culturally specific use of modes will be instrumental.

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